

ACADEMIC REGISTRAR  
ROOM 261  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON  
SENATE HOUSE  
MALL STREET  
LONDON WC1E 7HU

**Strategy in Context:  
The Work and Practice of New York's Downtown Artists  
in the Late 1970s and Early 1980s**

**By Sharon Patricia Harper**

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## **Abstract**

The rise of neo-conservatism defined the critical context of many appraisals of artistic work produced in downtown New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although initial reviews of the scene were largely enthusiastic, subsequent assessments of artistic work from this period have been largely negative. Artists like Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kenny Scharf have been assessed primarily in terms of gentrification, commodification, and political commitment relying upon various theoretical assumptions about social processes. The conclusions reached have primarily centred upon the lack of resistance by these artists to post-industrial capitalism in its various manifestations. My investigation engages in a debate with these texts by challenging these assumptions by which the downtown artists have been understood. I address the work of Richard Bolton, Suzi Gablik, Hal Foster and Craig Owens, amongst others, by critiquing their differing conceptions of structure and agency and introducing the analytical dualist approach of sociologist Margaret Archer, one which theorises the agency of social actors within social structures in a superior manner. After making my case, I investigate five economic and political conditions facing these artists, including corporate expansion, entrepreneurialism, the entertainment industry, the rise of the neo-conservative political agenda and the struggle for dominance amongst critics themselves. In each, I investigate the production and distribution practices of a wide range of downtown artists in relation to the historical context, from groups such as Colab and PADD to individuals including Ann Magnuson, David McDermott, Jenny Holzer, Richard Hambleton, John Fekner, Jane Dickson and David Wojnarowicz, in order to illuminate the relationship between such practices and the social structures which shaped such activity. In so doing, I conclude that artists were both constrained and enabled by these contexts, thus providing a more complex picture of their place in art history.

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## Introduction

*Everybody nowadays knows that the art world is rotten, rotten to the core.*

Thomas Hess, 1974<sup>1</sup>

One word more than any other has come to characterise the art and artists of New York during the 1980s – money. Its reaches appeared limitless as it flooded through the art world gates and art prices began to rise to astronomic sums. Everyone, it seemed, was taking up art collecting, unafraid to flash their cash. By and large, art appeared to function like any other commodity. Indeed, Alfred Taubman, the millionaire builder of shopping malls and owner of Sotheby's, seemed to think so when he famously said: "Selling art has much in common with selling root beer. People don't need root beer and they don't need to buy a painting, either. We provide them with a sense that it will give them a happier existence." (cited in Watson 1992:385) But bliss was not the only sentiment created in this environment. Many critics and theorists writing on this period in art history expressed serious discontent, if not outright contempt, for some or all aspects of the New York art world. The main accusations were of careerism and a fixation on monetary gain by art world figures, and its overall commercialisation. As Alison Pearlman (1998:9-10) has explained:

Reaganite rhetoric extolling the virtues of the free market and conservative economic policies, as well as their reverberations in the mainstream media about popular and corporate culture, made the problem [of commercialisation of avant-garde culture] seem especially urgent... Anxiety about the commercialization of art was so deeply rooted and pervasive among art critics that it transcended their shallower, but on the surface more pronounced, political identifications, aesthetic preferences, and their mud-slinging at each other's politics and aesthetic preferences.

The cries of corruption, and even revulsion, were not targeted in any one particular direction but rather at all the art world players. Artists were condemned for excessively focusing upon both their public profile and the market value of their works, acts which often formed the basis for arguments against their art historical value. Likewise, dealers were blasted for their apparent prioritisation of profit over quality. They were usually blamed for the vacuous hype surrounding their artists and their works. In conjunction, the media (naturally excluding the accusers themselves) were charged with collusion in the perpetuation of this hype, thereby ignoring their responsibility to remain distanced. The brunt of denunciations, though, was reserved for the collectors themselves. Their interest in art was viewed as insincere at best. Their main aims in buying works were perceived to be the conferral of status amongst their peers, and, above all, profit. Works were said to act solely as investment capital without any relation to their aesthetic merit. The wheeling and dealing of the collector in the artist's studio, in the gallery and in the auction house, were openly despised. In short, the art world was painted as rotten, mired in a cesspool of money and hype. This sentiment was summarised by art critic

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<sup>1</sup> As cited in Naifeh (1976). The quote itself originally derives from "Cellars and Sellers", *New York*, 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1974:100.



Robert Hughes in 1989 when he wrote: “What strip mining is to nature, the art market has become to culture.” (43)

Implicit in all of these vociferous criticisms was the assumption that the activity of the New York art world of this period was unprecedented. But these public lamentations were only echoes of similar concerns previously voiced since art production has been linked to business and the market for centuries. Art historian Oskar Bätschmann (1997) has charted the rise of the exhibition from the mid-eighteenth century, placing artists in competition with one another in their attempts to attract audiences, buyers and patrons. The influence of such competition on art production was an immediate cause for concern. Bätschmann explained that “[t]he exhibitions immediately gave rise to the suspicion that artists could be corrupted by money, mass taste, cheap applause and the pressure to succeed in the competitive art world.” (10) In a similar fashion Malcolm Gee, in *Dealers, Critics, and Collectors of Modern Painting*, dissects the French art market of the 1920s, pointing to the crucial role of auctions in both publicity and valuations, the different types of collectors who engaged in speculation and connoisseurship, and the deliberate attempts of both dealers and artists to control the prices of art works.

More recent critical writing has continued to raise the same types of concerns. In his study of the 1960s and early 70s New York art world, art historian Steven W. Naifeh (1976:2) observed that, “[b]y the late 1960s, almost everyone agreed that the art world had turned into a conspiracy between the artist and collector, aided by a ‘middleman’ trio of museum curator, art critic, and dealer, to delude the general public and to turn a quick profit.” He cited the publication of *Art or Anarchy?* by Huntington Hartford, as well as a *Newsweek* cover story on the New York art scene entitled “Vanity Fair”, both published in 1964, as amongst the first writings to establish a connection between artworks and the art world system in which they were produced, marketed and collected.<sup>2</sup> A diverse set of big-name critics such as John Canaday, Harold Rosenberg, Michael Fried and Thomas Hess made similar accusations, often pointing to specific acts or actors as the main culprits in the degeneration of the art world. Canaday bemoaned the antics of artists pandering to collectors; Fried dismissed the ever-increasing numbers of spectators since he felt that they understood little beyond an artwork’s theatricality; Hess scathingly described collectors and dealers as motivated solely by “money, prestige, and kicks, in approximately that order....”<sup>3</sup> Performance artist Allan Kaprow (1993:55) further confirmed the mistrust of collectors by artists in a 1964 article entitled ‘The Artist as Man of the World’, where he complained, “[collectors] support and buy art with a terrifying mixture of awkward avidity (‘Wow, does that swing!’), suspicion (‘Is he nice to me for my money?’), cheap bargaining tactics (‘I’ll take six paintings at half price!’), and a deep sense of inherited guilt for their parents’ philistinism...But such contrasts of intention are not appreciably different from what artists

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<sup>2</sup> The complete title of Hartford’s book is *Art or Anarchy?: How the Extremists and Exploiters Have Reduced the Fine Arts to Chaos and Commercialism*. (See p. 8 for Naifeh’s reference) The *Newsweek* article is dated 4<sup>th</sup> January 1964 (Naifeh 1976:17). The fact that both of these are more or less mainstream publications indicates the degree to which this view was held, and the public recognition of their interconnection.

<sup>3</sup> These comments are discussed in Naifeh (1976) on the following pages: Canaday on p. 8, Fried on p. 15, Hess on p.10. The quote from Hess is cited as an *ARTnews* editorial published in October 1964.



themselves experience....” But Kaprow ultimately defended the artist, regardless of his/her intention saying, “in any case, people are taking advantage of artists.”

There may be little surprise to find that these claims are so pervasive in the 1960s given the concurrent rise of Pop Art. The appeal of this movement’s representations of the icons of mass culture was broad, facilitating its incorporation into wider American cultural life. According to sociologist, Diana Crane (1987:37-38), the interest in Pop Art by collectors, gallery spectators and the mainstream press exceeded its predecessor, Abstract Expressionism, partly because the subject matter was easily and more directly understood. Supporters of this movement neither necessarily had nor required an understanding of aesthetics and art history and were often from the world of business. Implicated in this appeal were, of course, greater demand, greater production and greater press coverage, all of which were characterised as superficial and even cynical. As Crane explained, “Pop’s status as avant-garde was controversial due to the aesthetic content of these works and the extent of their appeal to collectors rather than critics.” (42) However, as Naifeh’s study confirmed, rumours of accolades secured via backroom dealing, price manipulation through purchase and production control, and partisan interests motivating sales and purchases went beyond the confines of Pop Art itself.

The fact that the increasing disgust with the entire art world system was set within the buoyant American economy of the 1960s seemed to reinforce the belief that the successes of many of the movements of the period were driven by money and not by aesthetic merit. Given these circumstances, one would expect that with the economic downturn of the early 1970s, the complaints highlighted by critics would have largely disappeared. Indeed, Naifeh’s conclusion was that by 1976 (the year his study *Culture Making* was published) the dominance of the New York contemporary art market had diminished and attributes this slowdown, in part, to the persistently poor stock market performance of the early 1970s. Most investment funds that were transferred to art in the event of a sudden economic downswing were usually invested in well-known artists with an established reputation and market history. This meant that vanguard studios were left relatively untouched as no significant investment was shifted into them. As the downswing persisted, however, less money was available for the ‘riskier’ investments of vanguard art, particularly that of unknown artists. As Naifeh noted, “even if a work by Jasper Johns held its price during a recession, one by Richard Serra was even more difficult to sell than before. The fortunes of the vanguard artist were indeed tied to the stock market, since he could only sell his work when the stock market was in good order....” (112) The fortunes of contemporary artists and galleries were undeniably affected by the ebb and flow of investment.

However, despite Naifeh’s observation that the New York art market was on the decline during the 1970s, other studies have pointed to the continuing growth of the business of art that continued well into the economic recession. Charles Simpson (1981), for example, detailed the expansion of SoHo as a centre of art business activity throughout the 1970s. In 1974, the year



after an art market peak,<sup>4</sup> the Mayor's Committee on Cultural Policy estimated that "one billion dollars worth of all types of art changes hands [in New York] annually." (Simpson 1981:15-16) The number of galleries within the area shot up after the first one opened in 1968, to eighty-four only seven years later. This number had outstripped those on traditional Madison Avenue locations with amazing rapidity. Leo Castelli, a major player within the post-war New York art market, grossed over \$2.5 million a year from his SoHo annex, convincing him in 1976 to move all his dealing in contemporary art over to this lucrative location. That year also saw the opening of America's first auction house devoted specifically to contemporary American art, Auction 393. As is generally acknowledged, the art market of the late 1970s was already back in full swing with its third peak of the previous eleven years occurring in 1979. In words that echo the 1960s criticism, art critic Robert C. Morgan (1998:xix) expressed his opinion that "[s]ince the late seventies, art has become increasingly identified with its commodity status" and concluded that by 1998 "art [was] now subjected to the same economic totalism as any other enterprise."

Like many of his contemporaries, Morgan attributed special significance to the scale of integration between business and the arts during the late 1970s and 1980s, despite the fact that many studies have shown the significant degree to which art and the art market have been historically intertwined. In particular, the group of artists based in downtown New York, whose rise to prominence significantly coincided with the rise of neo-conservatism in America, was singled out as particularly problematic in terms of a collapse of commercialism and art. In light of such concerns, a number of studies attempting to explain the relationship of these artists to their commercialised environment understandably surfaced. Many took a broader view of the context, examining certain social structures that were perceived to have shaped the emergence of these artists. Such approaches usually prioritised the impact of economic, political or ideological structures upon the area's art production, over and above any possible agential influence. Other studies, meanwhile, focused upon the players of the art world in downtown New York, be they artists, dealers, collector or critics, and examined the effects of individual activity upon the whole arts scene. In both cases, the aim was to understand why the artistic scene took the shape that it did. Also in both cases, their accounts were limited by the very terms by which they examined its activity. By explanatorily privileging either structure or agency more than the other, scholars limited their ability to fully explain the scene's historical development. As scholars within the field of sociology, including Anthony Giddens, Roy Bhaskar and William Sewell Jr., have argued over the past several decades, models of social explanation require both structure and agency to accommodate the complexity of the social world.

One such model of structural-agential interaction that has been developed by sociologist Margaret Archer over three volumes is the 'morphogenetic approach' that sits within the broader perspective of realist social theory. As will be outlined in detail in chapter 1, Archer's model has provided a superior account since she analytically distinguishes both between systemic factors, such as culture and structure, and between those factors and agency. Agents,

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<sup>4</sup> 1973 has been cited as a peak both by Naifeh (1976:111-112) and Simpson (1981:15).



in this framework, are understood to be both constrained and enabled by the structural and cultural context of action. This basic premise allows for both change and stasis within a given social context, a flexibility needed when analysing the downtown arts scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s. More importantly, since these social factors can be analytically distinguished, the model allows for different systemic influences to be identified and examined with respect to their specific impact upon historical developments. Following the morphogenetic approach, my study is broken down into an examination of two major systemic influences of the period in question: the economic and the political. Three chapters focus upon different aspects of economic influence. In chapter 2, the impact of increased corporate activity within the arts is assessed along with the process of gentrification stimulated by corporate expansion into urban areas. This chapter acts as a rebuttal against what are perceived to be key formative influences upon downtown arts activity. Chapters 3 and 4 then examine economic factors that had a more immediate effect upon arts production in the area. The former chapter examines entrepreneurialism as an artistic strategy by artists to both produce and distribute works. The latter chapter looks at the incorporation of alternative entertainment practices into artists' activity. The focus of my study then shifts from the economic to the political. Chapter 5 considers the validity of the downtown arts scene's characterisation as neo-conservative through an analysis of macro-political developments within the United States. Concluding that this description is inaccurate, I turn in chapter 6 to the micro-politics of art world criticism to offer an explanation as to why the label 'neo-conservative' was used in relation to these artists through an examination of the power relations that were operative in this period. The use of the morphogenetic approach provides a more nuanced assessment of each of these potential influences and reveals that while corporate activity in the arts and neo-conservatism were less proximate to the immediate development of the downtown arts scene despite the critical importance previously placed upon them, entrepreneurship, entertainment practices and art world criticism all played fundamental roles in its shape.

This artistic scene, of course was not a static environment, and like a conventional historical narrative, I will be identifying changes within artistic practices that arose as a result of different systemic factors. Again, the morphogenetic approach facilitates such an investigation through its inclusion of agency when examining a *dynamic* social system. Each of my chapters, then, will not only outline the systemic context of these artists, but also reveal the ways in which they interacted within those contexts. As will be shown, artists as social actors were both constrained and enabled by those structures. Unlike a conventional historical study, though, I will not pursue a chronological account but rather endeavour to explain change by situating agency within its specific social context of action.

As a study attempting to provide a more rigorous historical account of the period, historical delimitations are required. My initial understanding of the scene's geographic and historical boundaries consisted of artistic activity within the East Village (largely Alphabet City) between 1979 and 1985. Through greater research, however, those delimitations began to change. Geographically, the East Village was only one area of activity; the South Bronx, the



whole of the Lower East Side as well as other scattered pockets in Times Square, TriBeCa and even in SoHo, also featured. The time frame also shifted back to 1975 and continued through until 1992.<sup>5</sup> However, downtown artistic activity did not remain the same throughout that span, and can be further broken down into what I see are three phases of activity. The first period took shape in 1976 and continued until 1982, characterised by largely unorganised networks of cultural producers that were not specifically ‘visual’ artists. 1982 saw the solidification of the East Village into an ‘art world’ structure with galleries, dealers and collectors, albeit with the same sense of independence from the institutional avant-garde as was present in the first phase.<sup>6</sup> From 1986, East Village art institutions were increasingly integrated into the larger art world structures, seeing some of its independence lost but also losing much of its characteristic insularity. This study focuses mainly on the first period with some examination of activity that continued into the second phase.

Throughout all three phases, the arts scene in downtown New York housed many different movements, ideas, and groups of artists, and dealing with such diversity has added another dimension to my art historical delimitations. To begin with, I have labelled the artists’ activity under investigation as the ‘downtown arts scene’ rather than reverting to labels such as the East Village Art Scene already in existence. The reason for this is that I have chosen to be inclusive in my study rather than exclusive. This term is better able to capture diversity and thus include artists making films and television programmes, as well as artists engaged in graffiti art, and the more traditional avenues of painting and sculpture. Notably, as will be discussed in chapters 3 and 4, many artists worked in several areas of artistic production at once. The term also broadens the geographic area to include activity that was related but occurred in pockets all over the downtown area including the South Bronx.

The choice to focus upon inclusivity may be deemed to be controversial since differences between players and locations have been heavily emphasised by critics, art historians and the artists themselves. Art historically, those differences have been conceived in a variety of ways, the first of which was in terms of style. ‘Pluralism’ was the catchphrase of the day and critics as varied as Robinson and McCormick (1984), Benjamin (1988) and Foster (1985) devoted pages to discussing the plurality of styles, be it as an endorsement, as in the first two articles, or as a critique, as in the latter. Equally traditionally art historical was the attention paid to differences in media usage. Artists and groups were divided into filmmakers, performance artists, painters and sculptors and video artists amongst other categories by critics such as Frank (1979). A more recent method of categorising difference amongst artists has been pursued along ideological lines, where critics identified underlying agendas of artists and artworks, both intentional and latent. Critics like Rosalyn and Deutsche (1987) and Bowler and McBurney (1993) differentiated artists as politically challenging (thus positive) or complicit (thus negative).

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<sup>5</sup> The later date was suggested to me in a conversation with Dr. Marvin Taylor.

<sup>6</sup> Liza Kirwin (1999) focused upon this general phase in her excellent study, *It’s All True*. She has dated the “moment of impact” of the East Village Scene to the autumn of 1982. (121)



Artists also took an active role in delineating boundaries between themselves and other participants. Some of those lines of division were political: Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PADD) was expressly Marxist; ABC No Rio Dinero was also leftist and active in the Loisaida community. Some of those lines were artistic: Group Material was explicitly experimental; the New Cinema filmmakers were expressly anti-institutional avant-garde. Some of those divisions were based upon location; Kenny Scharf, Ann Magnuson, and John Sex were all devoted to Club 57 and focused their artistic activity around the Club's identity; graffiti artists like Fab Five Freddy, Rammel Zee, Crash, Daze and Futura 2000 were active in the South Bronx, and eventually based themselves at Stephan Eins' centre Fashion Moda, and later in the East Village at Patti Astor's Fun Gallery. There is little doubt that these many differences are important when understanding the downtown artistic scene at the time. Many of the players involved keenly felt these differences as was articulated by PADD member, Greg Sholette (2003) who expressed a deep sense of ideological distance from many of his geographically proximate artistic neighbours. "[S]ome venues and their audience [for our shows against gentrification] belonged to the same East Village Art Scene that many of us understood to be part of the process of gentrification itself."

The significance of Sholette's statement should not be underestimated since he suggests a seeming contradiction between the differences between players in this arts scene and their participation in the same artistic events. After all, if those divisions were so fundamental, one would expect the various groups to avoid interaction. However, the emphasis on the differences between artists and groups has unfortunately led to a distorted understanding of the period. The seeming incompatibilities described by Sholette become actually quite understandable when one takes into account the significant similarities and even shared practices within the scene. As I shall show in the following chapters, not only were production and distribution practices shared amongst different artists and projects (the result of significant interactive collaboration), but participants also mutually held several fundamental principles including a rejection of the institutional avant-garde as represented by SoHo and grant-maintained 'alternative' spaces and a desire to reach beyond the traditional 'art' audience to a broader public. Indeed, the reliance on community networks and common agendas between groups and artists was a fundamental feature of the scene.

Of course, these similarities did not necessitate strong personal friendships, although this was the case in many instances. These similarities linked groups and individual artists who were locally proximate but not necessarily living in the same neighbourhood or working in the same immediate social group. They also linked artists whose style and media may have differed significantly. Consequently, I have included artists and works that have been traditionally placed into different, and sometimes outrightly opposing, camps. Crucially, some of the divisions established by critics, particularly those that separated politically positive from the morally suspect become less convincing in this light. Scene participant Edit deAk, for instance, was the focus of negative critical attention, particularly for her apolitical and even hedonistic support of the supposedly 'carpe diem' artistic activity. (Perrone 1981:72-73) But in so doing, her activity



with political groups like ABC No Rio, has gone largely unmentioned. Such neglect was not intentional on the part of critics and historians alike. Rather, the interconnectedness of the downtown community made lines of division much more blurred, and in some cases practically non-existent, complicating efforts to categorise the flux of activity that made up the scene. The function of critics, therefore, to weed out bad artists from the good irrespective of their criteria, was facilitated by highlighting the differences between them while dismissing similarities and interactivity as superficial and unimportant. A major task of this project, then, will be to demonstrate the historical significance of these shared agendas and activities.

It is through the use of the morphogenetic approach that I aim to make a historical and theoretical intervention in the study of downtown artists. On the one hand, this study will develop a more complex picture of the context in which these artists worked than has been the case to date. In no way do I claim this study to be exhaustive, but the examinations of structure, culture and agency operative in this period do permit a better understanding of the historically proximate influences. In the process, of course, I hope to demonstrate Archer's model as a superior framework for investigations into art history, particularly with respect to art production, than those that have been previously advanced.



## Chapter 1

### Theorizing the Social Context: Frameworks for the Downtown Arts Scene

*Private patronage is in fashion. Some public relations firms, for example, are hired to help businesses choose the best place for their symbolic investments and to assist them in establishing contacts in the world of art or science.*

*In face of this, critical awareness is nil, or almost nil. People move along in a dispersed manner, without collective reflection.*

Pierre Bourdieu (1995:15)

During the 1980s a great sense of unease was felt by some in the art world, particularly critics and academics. The area that troubled them most was precisely the increased 'commercialisation' of art, with its apparently deeper integration into business. The stakes involved seemed high. Commercialisation, in many opinions, had now fully co-opted the radical force of art, particularly in New York, leading to, as Alison Pearlman points out, the belief in the death of the avant-garde. Amidst this panic and despair, theories were put forward as to why this travesty had occurred, with many critics and theorists using their analyses as the basis to formulate solutions and prescribe remedies.

The important thing to note is that in attempting to find *reasons* for this state of affairs, these writers were identifying causes, whether they acknowledged it or not. In other words, they were engaged in the construction of social explanations. Reasons, of course, varied enormously, as we shall see. But all of their explanations can be traced to underlying presuppositions about how change occurs in society. Like most accounts of social processes, these writers either implicitly or explicitly relied upon concepts of systemic determinations and/or agency. However, despite the increased number of accounts attempting to contextualise art of the period, the conceptions of systemic determinations and agency used lacked the precision to adequately grasp the nature of social causality in its full complexity.

In this chapter, I would like to begin by examining the frameworks of social explanation used by several of these critics and theorists. In the process, I shall identify what are the main difficulties with their accounts. These problems stem from the privileging of either systemic determination *or* agency, the collapsing of distinctions between determinations, and attempts to posit interaction *between* systemic determinations and agency but still lack any theoretical cogency. Concluding that the frameworks employed are inadequate for the task, I will then put forward the **morphogenetic** approach, theorised by sociologist Margaret Archer, as a superior explanatory framework. In this framework, structure, culture and agency are maintained to be analytically distinct, and their interaction is causal in nature. By positing different levels of



integration based on complementarities and contradictions, Archer outlines configurations that describe processes of social change and replication in a more complex manner than the other accounts under examination. In so doing, I will lay the foundations for my study of the 1980s New York art world.

## I

As already mentioned, many critics were alarmed by an apparent increased role of consumerism and commercialisation in art. This danger was explained by relying upon features that could act as the root causes of such change - systemic determinations and agency. Systemic determinations, sometimes broadly called 'structure', are generally understood as a consistent set of ideas, institutions and material resources that circumscribe our day to day activity. At the extreme end of this form of analysis, systemic determinations shape social processes beyond any agential control. Agency is generally understood as the capacity of human beings to exert individual or collective intentional influence on social formations. In a model that focuses upon agency, social processes are constituted by human volition alone, allowing complete control over events by the human agent. It is with respect to these two aspects of social explanation which I will now assess the theorists seeking to understand the 1980s New York art scene.

On the one hand were theorists and critics who focused upon the primacy of systemic determinations in social processes. This general focus was brought about through the interest in several key structural and poststructural theorists. Most specifically, the ideas of Louis Althusser were seized upon as a more sophisticated model of Marx's base/superstructure. Interested in the problem of lack of social change in capitalist societies, Althusser viewed the various structural determinations as woven together in an interlinking social system. Rather than a unidirectional pattern of causality, in which the economic structures affect the functioning and form of other structures whilst they have no reciprocal effect, Althusser (1969:210) uses the concept of 'overdetermination' which "enables us to understand the concrete variations and mutations of a structured complexity such as a social formation..., not as the accidental variation and mutations produced by external 'conditions' in a fixed structured whole...." As such, the system is viewed as closed since no 'outside' factor has structural influence nor is anything outside the system considered 'social'. Therefore, change is structurally predetermined, even if that influence should be random. As sociologist Nancy DiTomaso (1982:23) explains, "[A]lthough random empirical behavior is not theoretically part of the system, if such behavior leads to major structural changes, then it is interpreted as the structure itself which 'made way' (or created a 'niche') for the behavior. In other words, it is assumed that the structure, in theory, is always already constituted of social conditions that arise within it. That is, behavior may be random, but if 'selected,' it was structurally determined." Here, behaviour or, alternatively, agency, is set within the social system and is determined by it, and, as such, agents are (ideologically) constituted by their positions within that system.



It is in this respect that many art theoreticians, inspired by Althusser through his interest in psychoanalysis and its theorisation of the subject, also explored the Lacanian conception of the discourse-constituted subject. Within this framework, an individual only conceives of herself as such through a false sense of unity along with her incorporation into language. This process is enabled by two psychic mechanisms, the 'Imaginary' and the 'Symbolic'. In the first instance, the child (falsely) perceives herself to be unified through a developmental phase labelled the 'mirror stage'. At this point the child sees herself in the 'mirror', an either literal or metaphorical act that represents the stage at which culture, mediated through the mother figure, imposes a unity upon what had been until then (at least from birth) a fragmented self. Lacan claims, "The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality...." (1977:4) From this point on, the Imaginary consistently reinforces this sense of unity through almost all forms of representation encountered. The second part of subject formation involves the child's entry into language, or in Lacanian terminology, the 'Symbolic'. Rather than unification, this process establishes the child's sense of individuation through a process of differentiation. Like Saussure's differential account of meaning, the child is 'positioned' with respect to others around her, determined by a culture's codes and symbols (primarily taboos). As Noel Carroll explicates, "[T]he child finds its place in a system of names diacritically structured around the name of the (his) father; it finds its place, that is, in the most crucial pattern definition in its culture, one from which other cultural distinctions flow and which reflects the diacritical structure of language...[I]t is at this time that it enters language in the sense of entering what is thought to be the key relation of the system, thereby becoming a fully incorporated participant in the language." (1988:69)<sup>1</sup> Language, then, determines the constructed identity of that child by the position to which s/he is assigned. Once the child is a "full-fledged language/culture user", subject construction is in full operation.

Equally influential amongst art critics was the work of the French social theorist, Jean Baudrillard. He claimed that production and labour in modern capitalist society are no longer linked to their use-value. Rather, the process of 'exchange' has extended beyond traditional objects of use-value to all acts of sign exchange including desire, knowledge and ethics. In other words, his idea is that the link between sign and referent has been broken and now, signs (such as elements of one's 'lifestyle') only refer to other signs. "Use value and needs are only an effect of exchange value. Signified (and referent) are only an effect of the signifier...." (Baudrillard 1981:137)<sup>2</sup> The purchase of a car, for example, is not about its utility of getting the buyer from point a to point b, but rather the insertion into a social status network through the cultural

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<sup>1</sup> No doubt that adherents to this position will object to my reliance upon Carroll's account of Lacanian subject-positioning theory given his critical stance. However, aside from agreeing with many of his criticisms, I feel that he is admirably clear in his outline of this position. Many adherents tend to mystify their terms and maintain Lacan's notoriously abstruse writing style, a practice that I feel does little to support their arguments or aid the reader.

<sup>2</sup> See also Gane (1991:110-113).



valence of the make of the car. The result of such a development is that all exchange is relational and does not relate to any concrete reality. Baudrillard writes, "In fact, there is no reality or principle of reality other than that directly produced by the system as its ideal reference." (1981:137) This claim, of course, could be seen to reflect a Saussurian conception of social structure though its emphasis upon the notion of a determining system, in which agency seems to play no significant role.

The vision of society that this combination of poststructuralist ideas produced was two-fold. First, society was conceived as wholly structural. In this account, different types of structures were often collapsed into one, with ideology or discourse (the two were usually conflated) utilised as the privileged terms of analysis. Second, and resulting from the first position, human agency, when conceived of at all, had no operative force since action and its consequences were viewed as determined by those structures, their meaning and identity constantly shifting according to structural requirements.

These problems are evident in Hal Foster's collection of essays entitled *Recodings* (1985), which are heavily reliant upon this poststructuralist conception of society. A major aim of the book is to reveal the capitalist structures that underpinned the pluralistic nature of contemporary 1980s art. Through the interpretation of contemporary works, Foster hopes to show how those structures, at work within them, disempower the political nature of art through the splintering of its united front and attempts to provide an account of how artists and critics may resist such capitalist developments. To undertake such a project, however, he must first assume some underlying assumptions of agency that could allow such a resistance to occur. Foster demonstrates his adherence to a poststructuralist conception of agency when he says, "clearly any truly critical practice must...(re)construct rather than simply disperse structures of subjectivity." (6) Although Foster is attempting to posit some form of positive reconstruction of the subject, it is a discursive construction nonetheless since he assumes that subjectivity is dismantled and then recomposed through language. Human subjects, then, do not exist prior to their socialisation, meaning their entry into cultural symbol systems. However, the adherence to a discursively determined subjectivity undermines Foster's attempt to reintroduce agency into his poststructuralist project. Significantly, he claims that capitalist ideology has dissolved the unified force of the historical avant-garde into pluralistic artistic/consumer niches, thus robbing the avant-garde of its possibility of active resistance. "Posed as a freedom to choose, the pluralist position plays right into the ideology of the 'free market'..." (15) By claiming that the freedom to choose cloaks the ideological nature of pluralism, Foster is ultimately unable to transcend the poststructural framework in which freedom and choice are discursively determined and which play a fundamental ideological role through the myth of intentionality.

Not only does Foster prioritise ideological factors, he further conflates *all* forms of determination. In discussing theorists' accounts of the limitations of the base/superstructure model, he asserts that "all these critics still see the cultural and the economic as



(semi)autonomous realms related by ideology... And yet...the reality we seem to face now [is] a breakdown in the old structural opposition of the cultural and the economic in the simultaneous 'commodification' of the former and the 'symbolization' of the latter." (145) The economic and the cultural (in this instance, the discursive) have not simply become similar in nature by taking on the characteristics of each other, but now have become one and the same thing.

The difficulties with positions like Foster's where the discursive or ideological formation is perceived to be wholly determining, is precisely *in* the theorisation of change. Sociologist Margaret Archer labels this position 'downwards conflation', where the main premise of such arguments is that the systemic determination in question comprehensively "orchestrates" the replication of social relations. Archer's characterisation of such arguments (Archer 1998:31) appears to fit Foster's account in that he highlights capitalist discourse as the decisive factor in developing and maintaining the pluralistic environment of the period, without according any causal affectivity to the actions of its agents. Therefore, change by way of agency is theoretically elided. Furthermore, given that Foster tends to collapse different determining elements into one unilateral determination - in this case, ideology or discourse - he is incapable of capturing the means by which a range of social factors can causally interact with one another. Given such conflation, how does Foster see change come about?

Certainly for Foster notions of cause and effect are outmoded positivistic concepts that form part of the supposedly discredited empiricist framework.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it appears that causality does not play any significant part in his conception of social interaction. But Foster does not want to say that relations will stand as they are for eternity. In order to overcome this conceptual impasse, he posits "nonsynchronous forces", taken from Ernst Bloch, which are "incomplete elements in past social formations, residual ones in our own" (178). These forms will challenge the completion and closure of 'the code' (which he defines as the capitalist mode of production) by keeping alive past conflicting ideologies. Foster asserts that this will not bring about *progressive change* but will continually challenge the closure of the capitalist system.

However, it is difficult to see how his account of residual social formations *necessarily* can have any effects in and of itself. As Archer (1996:158-171) has argued, contradictions *can* exist within a system without stimulating conflict, such as the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity existing in a larger framework of monotheism. Without agents to tug at the contradictions, those elements would not *necessarily* clash in and of themselves. Furthermore, we cannot posit residual social formations without the need to account for *how* those formations fell from a place of prominence and were replaced by others. Some form of causation is needed to understand the change in social configurations. To posit such effects is indeed to implicitly advance causes, which would indicate that determinations need stimulants of some form to motivate or instil change. Unable to answer these questions adequately, this position is ultimately incapable of

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<sup>3</sup> This position is outlined explicitly in *Return of the Real* (1996:29), a position that I have countered elsewhere. See



accounting for social transformation.

It is worth mentioning at this point that Foster's position has softened somewhat from his hard-line post-structural writings of *Recodings*. In his 1996 work, *Return of the Real*, Foster has, to a large extent, dropped his use of Baudrillard's extreme form of structural determination.<sup>4</sup> He concludes that subjectivity, albeit a poststructurally-influenced decentered version, is once again on the table. Further, he posits "critical distance" as a political strategy toward which artists and critics should aim. Here, new discursive positions are taken up which both respond to broader history but also situate themselves with respect to their own (relative) context and identity.<sup>5</sup> Some readers may take these two postulations as an indication that agency is back on the agenda. But two points should be clarified. First, his interest in the "return to the referent" or subject is not a development of theories of human consequential action but rather an interest in identity. It is through 'other' identities that the reified Western, white, male subject is challenged. In addition, "critical distance" is a discursive situation *of* the subject rather than an active manipulation of structures *by* the agent. What these two points indicate is that Foster still views structure as the main formative influence in the shaping of artistic movements, in this case in terms of psychoanalytic cycles. He retains the idea that change is generated through a juxtaposition of incongruent structures.

The poststructural position taken by Foster was by far the more popular route taken by theorists given the pervasiveness of French poststructural thought in the 1980s and 90s. Reliance upon agency to explain the state of affairs in the New York art world was far more uncommon and far more varied in its theorisation. One form of agency theory, methodological individualism, was not developed in the humanities anywhere near the degree to which it was in disciplines such as economics, particularly with reference to game theory. In this approach, agents are generally reduced via empirical methodology to their individual characteristics, and society is formulated as the set of relations between by these composite "dispositions".<sup>6</sup> Given that empirical methodology was rejected for the most part, this position held little appeal for art theorists. However, agential explanations did appear and took either of two forms. The first is that of instrumentalism. This position is usually derived from particular readings of Marx and Gramsci whereby hegemony is seen to be instituted and controlled by one or more dominant groups. Focusing on one strand of the dominant ideology thesis, sociologists Nicholas Abercrombie and Bryan Turner (1978:151) summarise the position in the following way: "The

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Harper (2000/2001).

<sup>4</sup> I suspect that his move away from Baudrillard can be accounted for in part by the broader disenchantment with Baudrillard's writings after the publication of "The Reality Gulf" in the Guardian in 1991 where the French theorist claimed that the Gulf War would never happen, and even if it did, its reality or truth was inconsequential and indeed indeterminable. For a scathing but nonetheless insightful summary of the significance of Baudrillard's claims see Norris (1992).

<sup>5</sup> Although Foster discusses these points throughout, his main explication lies in chapters 6, "The Artist as Ethnographer", pp. 171-203, and 7, "Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?", pp. 205-226.

<sup>6</sup> The problems with methodological individualism are numerous, but I will forego any discussion of those difficulties as, to my knowledge, no art theorists of the period under examination took up this position. However, for a substantial theoretical critique, see Archer (1995:34-46).



dominant class is able to impose its system of beliefs on all other classes. The adoption of the ideology of the ruling class by dominated classes helps inhibit the development of a revolutionary consciousness and thereby contributes to the reproduction of existing conditions of the appropriation of surplus labour." More generally, the instrumentalist framework posits that social control and manipulation is enacted via the collective agency of the dominant class or classes. Structures are certainly acknowledged in this framework, but they too, along with the subordinate classes, are within the control of the dominant group. Archer (1996:46-71) calls these arguments 'upwards conflation', since all social formations are entirely manipulated and manipulable by the dominant group.

In order to highlight the difficulties with the position, particularly with reference to the 1980s New York art scene, I will turn to Richard Bolton's *Afterimage* article "Enlightened Self-Interest: The Avant-Garde in the '80s" (1998). In this essay, he attempts to explain the perceived increase in public profile of 1980s artists that had developed in conjunction with an increased conservatism in areas of artistic and political debate. Viewing this as a contradictory state of affairs, he seeks to understand this perceived phenomenon in terms of the capitalist power structures of society. Although not labelling himself an instrumentalist, Bolton conceptualises 1980s art formations in terms of the collective agency of a dominant group. He claims, for example, that the ruling classes (here meaning the business and corporate classes) establish power through the development of a culture that "reflects their interests and aims." "Culture provides the ruling classes with subtle opportunities to enter the public imagination, with ways to legitimate the agendas of the ruling class by associating them with the 'universal' human spirit." (24) Bolton does treat institutions as having a formative influence on cultural production, but rather than seeing them as distinct systemic determinations, he views institutions as wholly "engineered" by those in power. Further, the ruling class is viewed as actively seeking to quell any form of challenge to their power through its anticipation.

However, much like Foster, Bolton does not want to imply that resistance (and change) cannot occur, leaving us completely manipulated by the dominant classes. He postulates cracks in their armour, so to speak - contradictions that allow other agents to "create incursions in dominant reality [and] critical spaces that are provisional and temporary." (40) He likens this social process to a "battlefield", implying that change is made possible by two groups of collective agents slugging it out.

However, implicit in the logic of this position is the assumption that the control of the dominant group is fully coherent, homogenous and totalising. The group must act as one solid force, particularly if they are to shape social formations according to their will. In order to do this, the group must also have a definable ideology and recognised boundaries within their social formations. They all need to be able to understand what the dominant ideology is, and how those formations work, in order to be able to enforce them uniformly and anticipate challenges. The troubles with this position already seem quite evident. In order to allow for the possibility of



change, Bolton wants to posit inconsistencies and weaknesses within the rule of the group. However, in order to create and steer things as massive and complex as social formations, Bolton's ruling classes must act deliberately and coherently. In other words, Bolton has trapped himself in a paradox whereby the ruling classes must be solid and uniform to carry out the massive tasks he accords them, but must not be fully coherent to allow for their weaknesses. Also, there is a tacit assumption here that formations are constructed and dismantled with the rise and fall of a dominant group. No allowance is made for the fact, as historiographer Christopher Lloyd (1993) has argued, that historical formations build and develop over long historical periods that can straddle the dominance of different groups. So, without positing the independence of systemic determinations in some capacity, it is difficult to see how dominant groups could operate to maintain power without giving them almost omniscient vision as well as an existence prior to any social formation.

The second form of agential explanation is what Archer calls "technocratic consciousness", largely associated with the Frankfurt School. In this framework, science and technology have become interdependent, and form the basis of an overall dominant ideology. Early on, this ideology is viewed by Lukács to be an instrument of the bourgeois class. (Larrain 1979:201) However, as Horkheimer and Marcuse develop the theory, scientific rationality is seen to form its own justification and legitimation and has become "disconnected from class analysis." (203) Domination, therefore, is not exerted against the will of any particular class, but is rather a "submission to the technical apparatus which enlarges the comfort of life and increases the productivity of labour." (Marcuse cited in Larrain, 204) 'Technocratic consciousness', then, is the widespread pursuit of scientific rationalisation by agents whose frameworks of reference have been depoliticised and channelled away from a holistic vision that would reveal society's contradictions and irrationality. But, as Archer points out, this form of domination remains connected to social forces. Although not class-based, Habermas stresses it is still related to interests. He states, "the generalized interest in perpetuating the system is still anchored today, on the level of immediate life chances, in a structure of privilege. The concept of an interest which has become *completely* independent of living subjects would cancel itself out." (cited in Archer, 1996:64) It is agents, consciously pursuing scientific and technological development, "which determine the direction, functions and pace of [its] progress." (63)<sup>7</sup> Importantly, despite the rapid and far-reaching spread of the scientific ideology and the stunted power of revolutionary activity, agents are not ultimately locked into this system, and have the means to change its structures through awareness. Habermas, at least in earlier writings, maintains that although class consciousness is no longer an effective source of revolutionary potential, students and academics have the capacity to change the system through a repoliticisation of societal processes and the revelation of contradictions within those processes. So, not only is

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<sup>7</sup> Also see Larrain (1979:210) who also says that in Habermas' view, "the ruling class has succeeded in camouflaging itself by using the name of science. Science has not replaced class contradictions as the source of ideology, but the dominant class has instrumentalized the name of science to pretend it has." This should not be taken, however, as a bald form of instrumentalism, as it is the spread of 'technocratic consciousness' that joins disparate groups in common pursuits, even as some are dominant and some are dominated.



control agential, the method of altering the system ultimately rests with agents.

Although she does not set out to interpret the contemporary art scene in terms of the Marxist project of the Frankfurt school, Suzi Gablik, in her book *Has Modernism Failed?* (1984), presents a case with striking similarities to the theory of 'technocratic consciousness'. In this collection of essays, she attempts to link the contemporary art of the 1980s and its social environment. But instead of focusing upon science and technology (although she does briefly discuss them as having similar negative effects (92-4)) as we saw with the Frankfurt school, Gablik blames wider societal bureaucratisation for what she views as a moral degeneration of these art forms. Essentially, she sees the organisational capacity of corporate culture, or 'management', as dividing up what would otherwise be coherent groups into individualised positions. "Late capitalism...has maximised [individual striving] to such an extent that it seems to have broken the inward harmony of the social organism as a whole...." (80) As such, subjects do not unite but are positioned such that they can do nothing but pursue their own individual interests. And, this societal pursuit of bureaucratisation has increasingly encroached upon all aspects of life, making collective moral choices increasingly difficult to formulate and execute.

Like the later formulations of the 'technocratic consciousness' model, Gablik does not attribute this oppression to any particular class, but to the broader corporate culture that has grown throughout modern, Western society. What actually benefits that corporate culture has become understood to be universally beneficial for all and is pursued by society as a whole. As such, the oppressive bureaucratic structure is dominant because, she claims, "we made it so." "[E]ach individual is a tiny wheel with a fractional share in the decision that *no one effectively decides....* we are all responsible for the events of this world in terms of our own actions, even though it is not possible to relate these events to ourselves causally in a definite and clear manner." (99-100) So by this account, we, as human agents, collectively perpetuate the individualising formations that now shape our existence. But, she says, despite this, we have the capacity to save ourselves by collectively rediscovering and acting upon our moral responsibility. "The first step in breaking the bureaucratic oppression under which we are living is to develop the willingness to acknowledge that we are *all* a cause in this matter." (99) So, like the Frankfurt school theorists, Gablik deems social knowledge rather than revolution as the path to change. But unlike them, she claims that all human subjects have the capacity to change the system rather than only the few.

There are two major problems with Gablik's explanation that are also indicative of those found in the 'technocratic consciousness' model. First, there is the idea that one framework, mindset or ideology can manifest itself uniformly without the explicit and overt rule of a consciously coherent group. Many Marxists, as well as other cultural or social theorists, have taken up the idea that different classes or cultural groups develop their own frameworks of reference (at least to some degree) and, few theorists would argue the case that all segments of society are culturally uniform. Indeed, Gablik singles out critics and criticism as possessing



special qualities that enable them to challenge bureaucratisation. Through such postulation, she singles out a particular group in society, which is different than others, be it because they are positioned differently in society or because they possess certain capabilities that others do not or cannot have. Hence, not all cultural groups are identical. But Gablik speaks of the bureaucratisation of art as if this were the case. “The mental and moral capitulation of our society has no parallel in history. Its effects have invaded everyone’s mind and character....” (57) However, if an ideology requires internalisation by *all* of the different segments of society, then it would be reasonable to suppose that this ideology would not manifest itself uniformly as each cultural group would adopt the ideational framework to fit within the fold of already existing beliefs and viewpoints, shaping its form and implementation. More significantly, it is possible that the framework can conflict outrightly with other beliefs and be rejected. After all, she *does* accord human subjects full agential powers.

Like other art theorists relying upon agency in their explanations, Gablik does not fully reject the notion of structural or cultural influence as in methodological individualism. She says that corporate interests have absorbed artists into their fold and claims, “[t]his sharing of a specific social construct of reality among so many members of a given culture gives it the semblance of *natural* reality; the individual responds to this socially constructed reality as if it were constant and not socially conditioned....” (57) She even acknowledges economic determinations as a factor in the shaping of their circumstances. And yet, although they play a major role in our willing perpetuation of ideologies that suit the corporate élite, we are able to overcome them through critical reflection. “The role of criticism today, as I see it, is to engage in a fundamental reconstruction of the basic premises of our whole culture; it can be nothing less than challenging the oppressive assumptions of our own secular technocratic Western mentality.” (128) Here, the “knowing subject is reintroduced” to enable “emancipation based on critical reflection.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, we, as agents, can exercise our free will to manipulate, right to the very core, those forms which have thus far duped us. Of course, she introduces no social or material conditions by which this critically reflective process could be initiated. We just seem to do it. Without incorporating those structural and cultural determinations to which she refers, Gablik leaves us with an unconvincing portrayal of the changes that had occurred in the art world to that point, and the possibility of future change.

Ultimately, neither instrumentalism nor ‘technocratic consciousness’, both of which are based on agential explanation, makes a convincing argument when utilised as the basis for social explanations. In fact, the main problem for all three positions outlined thus far is that they exclude one side of the societal spectrum, and, as a result, all suffer from similar overall difficulties. For instance, they all lack the capacity to highlight internal differences in a society, given that they are interested in what renders it uniform and consistent. They also all focus on ideology or discourse, ignoring other social, structural or cultural factors. This approach leads to

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<sup>8</sup> This is Archer’s description of Habermas, but I feel it accurately captures Gablik as well. See Archer (1996:68).



a simplification of social relations and tends toward a unidirectional flow of influence. And, finally, as a result of these two problems, all have difficulty accounting for change in any convincing manner. In the end, understanding the circumstances in question in terms of the extreme ends of the structural-cultural determination/agency spectrum cannot provide a holistic picture of the workings of the art world.

Of course, not all critics and theorists have done so. Many, such as Andreas Huyssen and Thomas Crow, fall somewhere in the middle and tend to include aspects of both systemic determinations and agency in their analyses, although, as we shall see, not in any principled fashion. One significant reason for this is because frameworks by theorists attempting to reconcile structure and agency have not been taken up within the art history community.

Andreas Huyssen presents a more sophisticated analysis in his book, *After the Great Divide* (1986). The scope of his analysis is far broader than those of Foster, Bolton or Gablik. He surveys the more expansive realm of cultural production, particularly with reference to the project of the historical avant-garde, with the aim of understanding the contemporary phenomenon of postmodernism. Huyssen proposes that many factors play a role in the development and dissolution of a movement and emphasises the importance of "historical contingencies and pressures". For example, he cites the demise of modernist utopia as having "shipwrecked on its own internal contradictions and, more importantly, on politics and history,"(186) thereby indicating that one or more distinct social structures can be effective. In addition, he also rejects the erasure of subjectivity and intentionality from poststructural theory, denying that a single structure can wholly determine the ways in which those practices are carried out (Pearlman 1997:24). "To some, this dispersal of cultural and artistic practices and activities will involve a sense of loss and disorientation; others will experience it as a new freedom, a cultural liberation." (219) Here, he seems to indicate that agents will engage with their circumstances in different ways, implying that different experiences may be caused by different social conditions or even that agents may have some choice over the matter. Practically, however, his own analysis rarely heeds his own advice. Despite these disclaimers, he primarily focuses upon ideological structures, leaving us with little sense of how these 'other' factors could play a role. Nor does he elaborate upon *how* intentional subjects are able to creatively engage with those structures.

Thomas Crow, in his collection of essays, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (1996a), presents what I consider to be a more sophisticated and nuanced account of the period, however short his commentary is. His project is to draw out the interdependence of "advanced art" and mass culture, highlighting how the two have historically relied upon one another. More specifically, his study identifies that historical, economic and ideological factors all contributed to the development and maintenance of the 1980s New York art scene. Not only does he accord systemic determinations importance, but he also distinguishes between them. And further, he also claims that intentionality is a necessary ingredient, a point clearly highlighted in his



attribution of agency to critical postmodernists. (83) These artists can actively choose to engage with the situational conditions in deliberate and effective ways.

Although Crow does make some valuable observations, his model of explanation still lacks a degree of theoretical elaboration that would allow him even greater insights. For example, despite differentiating types of determinations, he does not perceive them to enter into conflict. Practically, this may not be a problem as it may be the case that all determinations work toward a similar end - in this case, the expansion of capitalism. But theoretically, Crow does not expand upon the relationship between them, taking it for granted that they would or should necessarily work in harmony, thus making different determinations seem almost interchangeable. His understanding of the relationship between systemic determinations and agency then becomes rather simplistic. The process depicted is reduced to an either/or scenario where the agents either perpetuate those determinations, or else challenge them.

Ultimately, however, none of these analyses fully come to grips with the complexity of the 1980s New York art world. Despite accounting for a greater range of formative and sustaining forces, most accounts still tend to focus on one ultimate influence toward which all the others are working. As a result, the analyses become overgeneralised, often inflating the importance of some factors whilst unjustifiably diminishing or completely ignoring others. This then leads to a misrepresentation of the 1980s art world dynamics. This is not to say that all determinations and all forms of agency need to be accounted for, simultaneously, in every analysis. Illuminating work has often been done when the examiner has focused upon the particularities of one aspect of social formation. But in the cases of the aforementioned studies, all of the writers, for a number of reasons, were aiming to contextualise the artwork within broader social relations. Crucially, these writers were responding to an urgent sense that contextualisation was needed, particularly as an antidote to the ahistorical nature of traditional formal criticism. In addition, those writing at the time were trying to expose the broader effects of Reaganism on art. And, in conjunction, all of these writers were aiming to theorise political strategies and modes of resistance against commercialism in the art world. In order to respond to all of these tasks, they had to provide some understanding of the greater social processes surrounding art's production and reception. Even though some are content to simply identify influential factors, most instead openly took on the challenge of theorising the nature of those social processes, and, as has been demonstrated, did so either by using models which were inadequate for the task, or else did not employ a sufficiently cogent approach.

## II

What I would like to propose now is a principled framework that I feel does far greater justice to the complexities of social processes through its theorisation of distinct, interacting systemic elements. Developed by sociologist Margaret Archer, the 'morphogenetic approach' is a model that separates social complexes into three broad but distinct types of social factors –



structure and culture, which are the systemic components, and agency, which is the social component. By separating them as such, she claims that each set of factors has their own distinct characteristics and that they are not reducible to one another. In other words, they are all autonomous and objective. However, to claim this is not to claim that each exists independently from the others. As we shall see, the systemic and social components rely upon one another to operate within and make up the social complex. Accordingly, she stresses in her preface to *Culture and Agency* (1996:xvi) that what she is putting forth is not philosophical dualism, whereby each of the factors are discrete entities that *happen* to interact, but analytical dualism which allows us to decipher distinctive and yet interdependent elements at work in the social complex.

To begin my explication of this approach, I will outline Archer's theorisation of the systemic components. Both structure and culture possess emergent properties that relate to their internal elements but distinguish them from one another. These properties are both real and identifiable, and stand in logical relation to one another. The emergent properties of structure (or SEPs), for instance, are those "internal and necessary relations between its constituents [that] are fundamentally material ones." (Archer 1995:175) In other words, SEPs are principally those relations dependent upon people and physical entities as material resources. These properties are distinguished as materially-bound (as opposed to rule- or meaning-bound) in three ways. First, SEPs 'have autonomy'. As such, material resources often must exist independently to those social rules and meanings that surround them, since the intelligibility of those rules and meanings often hinges upon reference to them. Secondly, SEPs are 'anterior' as they frequently limit the meanings that are effectively placed upon them. Thirdly, SEPs exert 'causal influence' in that effects produced are not always due to the meanings attached to them. Furthermore, this relationship can influence those meanings already conferred upon it. For example, the relations between medical research – treatment – disease can be said to be material in that most medical research is necessarily dependent on the physical existence of disease, and treatment is necessarily dependent upon both.<sup>9</sup> Meanings and rules attached to them are reliant upon those existing anterior relations in order for this to be the case. In these ways, those properties that are tied to material resources can be said to be independent and real.

Cultural emergent properties (CEPs) are also real and identifiable, but are not tied to material resources as with SEPs. Rather they are internal and necessary relations that are *logical* and are based on the propositional law of non-contradiction. Practically speaking, CEPs are components of the cultural realm, which includes beliefs, theories, and ideologies.<sup>10</sup> Again, these emergent properties exist autonomously, "independent of anyone's claim to know, to

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<sup>9</sup> This is excluding, of course, those instances of medicine that deal with the purely psychological disorders, such as neuroses.

<sup>10</sup> Here I am using 'ideology' in the negative sense (beliefs or ideas imposed or otherwise used to maintain systems of domination) rather than the neutral sense (all systems of thought and belief) for the same reasons as outlined by Larrain (1979:117-122), who argues that the concept of ideology loses any real meaning once applied to all belief systems. If we use the neutral definition, we are still left with the need to differentiate between the various roles



believe, to assent or to assert them.” (180) This argument may be considered contentious given certain relativist critiques of ‘logic’ as being culturally-generated and contextually-bound. But, as Archer argues, there are good reasons for maintaining the autonomy of CEPs. For one, evidence suggests that despite the societal variability of propositional formation, there is invariance in the law of non-contradiction. Social theorist Steven Lukes has made this clear when he argues that without the law of non-contradiction, people of any particular culture could not “even be credited with the possibility of inferring, arguing or even thinking[.] If, for example, they were unable to see that the truth of p excludes the truth of its denial, how could they even communicate truths to one another and reason from them to other truths?” (cited in Archer 1996:110) In addition, the possibility of cross-cultural translation also indicates that logical relations are to be found in all cultural domains. In order to grasp even the most simple utterances and statements, we must rely upon some ‘bridgehead’ (a term linked to the philosopher Martin Hollis) or common ground upon which to begin any form of dialogue. Without some underlying logic as a major component of that bridgehead, we would never reach any significant form of cross-cultural understanding, particularly about differing belief systems and modes of thought. Nor could we make comparisons to our own frameworks. It is only through the shared logical features of the ideational realm that we can draw any of these types of conclusions. From these two points, then, we can uphold the possibility of cultural emergent properties being logical in nature.

Although structure and culture are generally considered to be the two main systemic components, Archer also attributes emergent properties to people that are non-agential in form - PEPs. These properties are defined by the fact that they are bound to the *relations between* groups of people, examples of which are demographic configurations. Like the other emergent properties discussed, the identification of PEPs hinges upon their autonomy from people themselves. Like SEPs and CEPs, these properties can be identified as objective by their potential causal influences. She explains that PEPs are able to “modify the capacities of component members (affecting their consciousness and commitments, affinities and animosities) and exert causal powers proper to their relations themselves vis-à-vis other agents or their groupings (such as association, organization, opposition and articulation of interests).” (1995:184) In other words, the overall relations between members of society will influence (though not determine) their intentions and activities. It is PEPs, as well as SEPs and CEPs, which delineate the systemic forms that make up the structured aspects of society.

It is important to note that although Archer is arguing for the natural necessity of these emergent properties as independent, internal relations, she still maintains that they are relational and contingent. It would be a mistake to interpret her definition of social relations in absolute or *a priori* terms or to assume that these relations “have to exist”. Although objective, these properties are necessarily bound to the context in which they develop. “Natural necessity only



states that X cannot be what it is without certain constituents A, B, C, N' and the relations between them." (174) In other words, logical and causal features are imperative and objective in the *functioning* of cultural or structural relations, and are only analytically autonomous and separable.

What is key to understanding the role of the systemic elements in the morphogenetic model is their capacity to affect the lives of agents in ways that are not necessarily the result of any immediate agential action. Systems often straddle different eras, generations and social groups, and thus take shape according to cumulative effect of past activity or causal effects between the systemic elements themselves. Thus, these various factors provide the shape of the social world into which we are born, as their temporal existence does not usually coincide with our own. For instance, in Great Britain the family unit, the healthcare system, and food production were all in place prior to and after any one individual's existence. This lack of choice over the circumstances into which we enter is what Archer calls "involuntaristic placement." (1995:201-203) We continue to be subject to the shaping forces of structure and culture throughout our lives. The educational system can act in delimiting our knowledge development and career opportunities. Economic structures play a significant role in determining which opportunities are open to us during our lifetime. Furthermore, cultural systems will circumscribe those political avenues available to us. Overall, the systemic elements account for what is available, either materially or culturally, and how it should be distributed, for the configurations of institutions and the different roles made available to people. "In these ways, situations are objectively defined for their subsequent occupants or incumbents." (201)

However, the systemic elements of society are not wholly deterministic in this model and cannot be relied upon to fully explain the operation of the social complex. Agency also plays a key role and is uniquely characterised as the domain of intentional activity carried out by way of reasons. As such, individuals are not just bodies assigned to carry out prescribed tasks. They are knowledgeable about the structural and cultural elements that they are acting out. This knowledge can be practical knowledge, i.e. they know what to do and how to do it, or reflexive knowledge, i.e. why they are doing it. They also have the capacity to recognise that in acting out one practice, they may be excluding other possible alternatives, and, in so knowing, can choose between those options. Those choices will be limited by the structural and cultural circumstances and/or by a variety of material, biological or other circumstantially generated interests. However, these elements are not simply constraints placed on the agent, but can also enable activity. As social theorist William Sewell explains, "Not only can a given array of resources be claimed by different actors embedded in different structural complexes (or differentially claimed by the same actor embedded in different structural complexes), but schemas can be borrowed or appropriated [by agents] from one structural complex to another." (Sewell 1992:19)<sup>11</sup> People can be seen as mediators, negotiating the systemic elements with

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<sup>11</sup>Although Sewell advances a structurationist model along the lines of Giddens, a model that Archer specifically



which they are faced, whilst the structural and cultural elements act as that which is mediated.

Archer, in contrast to other theorists such as William Sewell and Anthony Giddens who also propose models that include both system and agency, provides us with a detailed breakdown of the different elements that make up agency within social systems.<sup>12</sup> For Archer, it is not enough to simply conflate all human activity into the one role of 'agent', as the structural and cultural elements constrain and enable individuals at different levels and in different capacities. Furthermore, group activity can differ from individual activity in the ways in which it is constrained and enabled. In order to account for such nuances in any given social system, Archer analyses the human dimension to the social system in terms of three components: agents, actors and persons. The term 'agent' covers the activity of groups. In other words, agents are always collectivities. Of course not all members of a groups are knowingly so, nor are all groups identifiable immediately as such. To help understand these group dynamics, she proposes two types of agents – corporate and primary. Corporate agents are those groups who have an articulated agenda and have organised in an overt fashion in order to achieve their aims and objectives. In so doing, they also have the capability to maintain or change cultural and structural systems in accordance with their articulated intentions. Those who may be counted as within this definition include “self-conscious vested interest groups, promotive interest groups, social movements and defensive associations.” (Archer 1995:258) These groups are often in positions of power, although not necessarily. Corporate agents can articulate and actively pursue their aims to move *to* positions of power, with the possible result of effective change/maintenance or else attempts at change/maintenance that are ineffective due to the competing interests of other agents or restrictions of systemic elements.

Primary agents are those groups who “neither express interests nor organize for their strategic pursuit, either in society or a given institutional sector.” (259) This is not to say that primary agential activity is not effective on systemic elements. Rather, their intentions and aims are left unarticulated and unorganised. The effects produced by primary agents, then, are unintended aggregate effects. Unintended, here, does not clash with the overall definition of agency as intentional because the agents can still act intentionally but not with the aim to produce their aggregate effects. For example, 'christmas shoppers' (as primary agents) may decide to spend less than otherwise predicted, as was the case in 1999. This group, without articulating the desire to spend less, all acted in a similar, purposeful, but unorganised, manner. The effect was that businesses fell short of their projected profit margin, and the economy generally slowed down. So, primary agents do act intentionally and influence structure or culture.

Archer attributes four powers to agency that are relevant at this point in our discussion.

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argues against, his summary of agential interaction, in this instance, is still applicable and illuminating.

<sup>12</sup> The analysis of agency presented by Archer is intended to provide a practical model utilisable in the theorisation of sociology. She acknowledges that there are more “primitive strata” such as consciousness, mind and matter. (1995:254-255) Like her, I feel that it is neither practical nor necessary to provide analyses on these levels given the scope of the study at hand.



All agents have the capacity to articulate shared interests, organise for collective action, generate social movements and exercise corporate influence. The implication of this for our primary agents is that they have the capacity to *become* corporate agents should the circumstances be conducive. A good example would be the recent organisation of British hauliers and farmers to protest the governmental fuel tax rate. Regarding the consumption of fuel, hauliers and farmers did not exist as corporate agents in the past. They consumed fuel as all other business consumers. However, as prices escalated affecting the sustenance of profits, hauliers and farmers expressed a common aim to reduce fuel tax, and thus relieve financial pressure from their businesses. They were able to organise into a defined body of agents with a stated aim, which culminated in the blockades of fuel refineries and depots as a collective action. Of course, the reverse may occur whereby the once common, stated and actively pursued aims of agents become diffused. Corporate agents then lose their status as such and those aims are no longer articulated by the same groups nor in the same manner.

In contrast to the collective nature of agents, actors function in a singular fashion and are marked by their relations to individual roles. Each actor “becomes such by choosing to identify himself with a particular role and actively to personify it in a particularistic way.” (276) As such, actors are defined as “role incumbents”. Of course, actors do not freely choose roles without any constraints, and it is their positions as agents that help to define which roles may be open to any one person. Moreover, social roles differ considerably as to their institutional power and the material resources accessible as a result of being affiliated with a particular institution. Through the involuntaristic placement into groups with vested interests and opportunity costs, individuals are guided (although not determined) in their decisions and choices regarding which roles they occupy. Agents may also alter the roles available to any societal member, either intentionally or as the unintended consequence of other activity. These roles are objective in their own right, despite requiring someone to fulfil them, because their duration usually exceeds the length of occupancy by any one individual, even with his/her particular characteristics and inflections given to the role. What she is arguing for, then, is the notion that the role and its inhabitant are analytically distinguishable. This, in turn, means that something must exist apart from that role which can inhabit it.

Archer calls this something a person. A significant defining feature of this identity, analytically distinguishable from the *social* identities of agent and actor, is a continuity of consciousness. This is “[t]he idea that a person is something which is aware of its persistence and progress through time.” (282) In the case of human identity, she is not arguing for a *concept* of self, which she views as socially derived, but rather a *sense* of self. Certainly, the concept of human identity has been a thorny issue in recent decades, particularly given the dominance of the Lacanian theory outlined previously. However, despite theories against the conceptualisation of human identity prior to social roles, Archer argues that there are good reasons to accept the necessity for maintaining the concept of a personal or human identity. To begin with, a continuous identity that is distinct from the identity of an actor must be assumed in order to



understand the choices and actions of individuals as found within the social context. “[U]nless there is self-awareness that it is the *same* self who has interests upon which constraints and enablements impinge *and* how they react today will affect what interests they will have tomorrow, then questions about the meaning and explanation of social action never arise.” (ibid) Furthermore, Archer argues that humans can and must have non-social relations with the world as non-social beings. Without such relations, it would be difficult to understand how infants sift through all the information that bombards them. They must have some characteristics of the “natural kind” if they are to have the capability to decipher natural objects, such as rocks, from social objects, such as their parents. They must also have the (natural) capability to acquire social skills. As film theorist David Bordwell has so aptly pointed out, the Lacanian mirror stage cannot occur without the child’s cognitive capability to identify persons from all other animals or objects, to pick out a ‘reflection’ from what might otherwise be another person or object, and identify that reflection as itself. (Bordwell 1989:18) Even if we accept the common objection to this that the mirror-stage should be viewed not literally but symbolically, as the child’s entry into language, we must still posit some mechanism by which the child could decipher words from other sounds in the environment and actually *learn* language. Archer argues along parallel lines when she says, “before we can receive particular concepts of self from our society, we have to be the kind of (human) being who can master social concepts.” (1995:286) Simply because our natural skills can only be exercised within the social context, does not mean that they are social in nature. Instead, natural skills are reliant upon the social environment for their operability but are not reducible to it. So, the category of ‘person’ is necessary to explain the continuity of individuals as they act within the social complex and their natural, non-social relations with the world.

Despite the differences accorded to each, the categories/roles of agent, actor and person all work together to form and constitute each societal member. Persons are born into a particular set of circumstances that situate them as agents. The combination of agential positioning and natural capabilities then guides the individual’s choice of role(s), shaping how that role will be carried out in the surrounding social circumstances. In turn, the role may affect the individual’s placement as an agent. For instance, the vested interests of a role may shift one’s collective allegiances, or the position of the role may situate one differently with respect to the agential groups surrounding that role. Thus it is the individual as agent that acts in the mediary capacity between persons and their social roles through the involuntaristic placement of persons into collectivities and the role opportunities offer by that placement. This interaction is central to our understanding of society because, as Archer explains, “it is only the specific relationship to the particular projects of particular agents in particular positions which allows us to call their conditional influence a ‘constraint’ or an ‘enablement’”. It makes no sense to think of any emergent property being constraining or enabling by nature or in abstraction.” (198)

Outlined so far have been the key elements of a social complex as envisioned within the morphogenetic approach. On the one hand we have structure and culture that make up the



systemic components. On the other hand, we have agents, actors and persons that make up each social individual and, more generally, agency. These elements are not isolated, but rather interact in shaping and influencing one another by way of their causal and intentional capacities. But this interaction alone cannot complete our list of ingredients that make up complex social processes, as we still would be unable to account for the different interactive configurations of change (what I will now call morphogenesis) and stability (morphostasis). To this end, Archer introduces three main elements: system integration, social integration and time. System integration is the degree to which the internal relations between structural and cultural elements support, sustain and reinforce one another. Integration will then be 'high' or 'low' depending on the manner in which the different elements co-exist. She uses the example of taxation and bureaucracy pointing to the need for taxation to be effective in order to sustain bureaucracy and bureaucracy to be efficient in order to maintain effective taxation. This scenario as set in a technocratic society would be viewed in terms of *high* system integration as the other structures such as wage earning and management reinforce and support bureaucracy/taxation. In other words, the different systemic elements exist as, what Archer calls, complementarities. *Low* system integration is where systemic elements exist in conflict, incongruity, or rivalry, called 'incompatibility'. Returning to the example, the same bureaucracy/taxation relationship would struggle to operate within a feudal or subsistence society where the other structures do not reinforce this relationship. As I will explain shortly, low integration or incompatibility does not mean that those conflicting systemic elements cannot co-exist. Agents may find compromises by which to join the two, regardless of how precariously. However, the degree of integration between systemic elements will affect the overall form of the societal configuration.

Social integration is a similar concept only this time it is the degree to which the relations between social beings support, sustain and reinforce one another. Agents may coexist with little rivalry or conflict. The reasons for this may vary of course and can include coercion or choice. But nonetheless, in both instances these would be cases of high social integration (again complementarity) On the other hand, agents/actors may engage in open conflict of many sorts, which would be cases of low integration and incompatibility. Again, the ultimate shape of societal formation will be dependant upon the degree of integration between social elements.

The third ingredient is really two related ones - causality and time. As has already been established, each of the elements of the overall social system - structure, culture and agency - has the capacity to influence the development of one another. The introduction of a new material resource may alter the ways in which certain ideas about distribution are rationalised. Conversely, the introduction of new ideas (say ones borrowed from another, previously separate society) may alter the ways in which roles are allocated. In both of these cases we have causal relationships between systemic elements. Structure and culture may also have causal effect on agents such as when material changes can alter the roles that agents play or the goals of their interests. Once altered, the agents in those new roles or situations may gain new or different handles on certain elements of structure, facing new choices with access to new resources or



ideas previously out of their reach. As such, they may be in a position to effect changes to aspects of a system. This causal relationship Archer labels "reciprocal influence" in the process of "double morphogenesis". Systemic elements affect social interaction, which, in turn, affects systemic elements.

These causal relationships, however, are only intelligible through 'time'. One state of affairs exists at  $T_1$ , alteration occurs to leave another state of affairs at  $T_2$ . This point is central when it comes to contextualisation if one is to posit either morphogenesis or morphostasis. But the importance of time as a variable in change or stability is highlighted once we take into account that systemic elements and social interaction often function over different time spans. Analysis of interacting components pivots upon the question of when elements develop in relation to one another. As such, time becomes not so much a marker of events but an independent variable within specific societal developments.

So now, with these theoretical elements in place, we are ready to examine the different situations that arise within the interaction between structure, culture and agency. Within these relationships, four basic configurations appear: **necessary complementarity**, **necessary contradiction**, **contingent complementarity**, and **contingent contradiction**.

In the first instance, **necessary complementarity**, integration of the social and systemic is high. These are instances where ideas, institutions and agents all function to reinforce one another and maintain the system (morphostasis). As such, agents tend to elaborate upon existing ideas and institutions *within* their particular system but will not attempt to challenge or upset the systemic framework, nor will they look to adopt new forms from outside systems. It should not be implied here that all actors within such a situation are necessarily 'content'. Archer explains that "necessary complementarities create situations in which everyone has something to lose from disruption... [T]he changes which would constitute gains are less than obvious and would anyway confront the combined pressures of those ensuing losses." (1995:220) The defining process, in the case of **necessary complementarity**, is the maintenance of an established system, alternatively called the "situational logic of protection".

The second configuration is that of **necessary contradiction**. In this instance, incongruities run through one or more of the structural or cultural elements leaving system integration low. Those elements will be internal and necessary to one another yet "the effects of their operations are to threaten the endurance of the relationship itself." (1995:222) Agents, again in this case, will be circumstantially tied to the system with few desirable alternatives, which accounts for the high level of social integration. However, due to the incongruities, this configuration is inherently unstable. Of course, should opportunities or means arise for groups who then alter their roles or vested interests, the contradictions could be pried apart. In order to maintain the system in a relatively static condition (again, morphostasis), constant balancing and adjustment is required. The situational logic arising in this configuration is that of compromise.



Whilst in both these configurations the overall system is in a state of morphostasis, the next two are instead characterised by change or morphogenesis. The first, **contingent complementarity**, is a configuration in which system integration is high whilst social integration is low. In this instance, groups of agents, motivated by anticipated gains, will actively adopt structural or cultural elements from outside the system in which they are working. The elements adopted will accord with those structures already in place, but will alter the balance of resources, power, ideational control etc., so as to advance their own interests. The net result of such an adoption is a diversification of these structural and ideational dimensions of the social context. It is the alteration or disruption of this balance that makes this configuration morphogenetic, and the situational logic generated is that of opportunism.

The other morphogenetic configuration is **contingent contradiction** where both system and social integration are low. In this instance, contradictions arise as agents expose and capitalise upon differences. These tensions are disruptive, creating a cleavage within a group of agents, or between groups. As a result, contingent contradictions lead to structural and ideational pluralism. Since these contradictions are contingent, with no necessary relation binding the elements together, agents will tend to emphasise the cleavage and attempt to eradicate the opposing side. Hence, the situational logic is that of elimination.

A common objection at this point might be that societies are complex and may not always fit neatly into the configurations just outlined. And, undoubtedly, this is the case. But these are not intended to be rigid boundary markers, but rather varying patterns that arise within interaction. It is most likely that in large-scale complexes we find all four at work in various respects. In a micro social context we might find just one or two configurations at work. Archer argues, "there is no *a priori* reason to expect to detect any particular form of patterning in every social formation encountered." (1995:227) As social systems are open, any variety of relationships can be found. It is rather a matter of the context itself, set in time, which will disclose the patterning of the system. "Consequently it is an empirical matter which...properties characterise...relationships making up the system." (1995:227-228) What are not empirical are the situational logics arising from the different configurations. Protection, compromise, opportunism and elimination will figure according to which configurations are present in any given context.

Before moving on to my study of the 1980s New York art world, I would like to reply to two possible objections raised against the use of this model. The first relates to the fact that 'analytical dualism' is a realist model. Talk of universal logic and objective structures must be painful to relativists' ears. However, as I have defended elsewhere (Harper 2000), there are good reasons not to reject a realist position. First of all, the relativist argument that systemic factors only exist within any society's conceptualisation of them puts us into similar difficulties as were found with Richard Bolton's conceptualisation of social structure. Any structural and cultural



elements found in a given societal formation would have to be constantly rebuilt with every new group that rose to a place of dominance, or every new generation that took over the reins of any given institution. As any historical examination will reveal, this is not generally the case. As was argued against Bolton, to do so would require an astounding amount of predicated co-ordination and clear-cut, common aims and initiatives. It would also require the indoctrination of the vast group of people who are to be subjected to this power in a relatively short span of time. Social groups are not so clear-cut so as to make this an easy or even feasible process. Rather, cultural and structural formations often span across social groups divided by time and space. As such, they are not the subjective formulation of any one person or group.

Of course the main argument used to support the subjective construction of the systemic infrastructure is that all social 'reality' is constituted in and by language, thereby making its formation subject to the restrictions of the possibilities of conceptualisation offered by that language. There is little doubt that societal understanding is developed subjectively, even when dealing with objective phenomenon. However, there is no reason to reject reality on this basis if we posit a model of understanding in which the accounts are subject to increasing degrees of plausibility, and we "attempt to discover causes of events *within* the structure of the complex systems of which they are a part." (Lloyd 1993:145) If we follow the lead of Lloyd and apply his observations of history to sociology, realist sociological accounts are the product of a framework/theory/observation relationship. "Explanations always remain bound by frameworks, but our frameworks improve through feedback from empirical observation, experimentation, and engineering... [This] interrelationship argues that each part of the network exercises an influence over the other parts." (142) A similar argument put forward by Bhaskar is elaborated upon in Christopher Norris' book, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism* (1990:96-103). Here, Norris explains that Bhaskar reveals the common conflation of two propositions, one that states the 'epistemic relativity' of knowledge and truth values (i.e. that they are produced and received socially) and the other that maintains the 'judgmental relativism' of all propositional statements. He says that subjectively generated knowledge is always open to reassessment and revision based on new information (most often in the form of recalcitrant data) unaccounted for in previous theories or models. Despite the fact that this knowledge may be revealed to be ideological in purpose or substance, "the realist model still holds, since the process of criticising scientific truth-claims can always be extended to include such forms of reified consensus thinking." (99)

The second possible objection to my using the morphogenetic model may arise from the fact that I am importing an approach from a different discipline – sociology. For some, this may not pose a problem, seeing as most of the commonly referred to poststructural theorists cited within art history are from outside disciplines. But often the call is for models to stem from humanities research only. Thomas Crow, for instance, dedicates his book, *The Intelligence of Art* (1999), to precisely the project of emphasising the validity of art historical models in the practice of interpretation. But as I think he would recognise given his style of interpretation, contextualisation plays a significant role in understanding art, often providing the background for



many interpretations. And, to do so necessarily involves crossing over into the work and areas of investigation in other disciplines. This is not to say that art historical or theoretical models are not valid and useful. However, this cross-border influence often results in positive and enlightening results. If we are to aim for social contextualisation, we need to take into account the ways in which the broader context has been theorised in other disciplines.

Having now outlined this approach, my aim in the following chapters is to better illuminate the functioning of the 1980s New York art world than was achieved by the previously examined critics and theorists. Whereas the frameworks used by most of those critics lacked the capacity to provide a fine-grained account of this period, the morphogenetic approach allows for a wide range of systemic influences, as well as the reciprocal influence of agency. Furthermore, the concepts of morphogenesis *and* morphostasis, occurring simultaneously in different configurations within a system, allows for far greater complexity than was possible with the other frameworks.



## Chapter 2

### **“High art, high rise, high finance”: Investigating the Impact of Corporate Expansion<sup>1</sup>**

Having outlined the morphogenetic approach in chapter 1, the focus will now turn to the downtown arts scene in New York and the ways in which such a model helps us understand the structural and cultural constraints and the responsive actions of artists in both their work and their practice. In the next three chapters, the focus will be upon economic structures, emphasising those that have been customarily associated with downtown artists, such as corporate expansion and gentrification. In the case of the former, I shall argue that they are too distant to be considered a significant systemic influence upon the downtown arts scene; in the case of the latter, I shall demonstrate that standard accounts of the relationship between artists and gentrification have been historically misunderstood. Other influences such as the concurrent growth in the number of artists and the renewal of entrepreneurialism, as well as the burgeoning alternative entertainment industry, that shall be examined in chapters 3 and 4 respectively, are more proximate and more relevant to a contextual understanding of the period.

Understandably, the conception of downtown artists and their work has been inextricably linked with the Reagan era of conspicuous consumption, deregulation, and laissez-faire economic policy. Part of this is due to the high profile of arts investment potential discussed in the media at the time, and the high prices paid for works both in the gallery and in the auction house. As the number of buyers of art grew, the belief was that these were most likely speculators banking on quick and astronomic returns on purchased works. This conclusion then led to the assumption by many art historians and critics that the success of these artists was driven by this influx of investment cash and that had it not been for this Reaganite fad, these artists would likely have never come to the fore. Hal Foster (1995:122-23) gave a representative analysis of the work of Koons, Steinbach, and other “commodity” sculptors when he claims that, “[i]n the 1980s this elite powered the extraordinary boom in the art market (the name Saatchi may stand for this investment group), and naturally it rewarded practices that reflected its own conventionalist and posthistorical worldview. In this sense simulation painting and commodity sculpture were forms of salon portraiture, and when the market fell in 1987 and the collectors withdrew, these forms declined too.”

One notable study of the period in which forms were explained in terms of their economic conditions was Frederic Jameson’s 1991 work, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Relying in large part upon Ernst Mandel’s model of capitalist development, Jameson has charted a correlation between forms of art and forms of capitalism, pointing to similar and concurrent changes in both, and concludes that the former is thus representative of the latter. Given



the timing of the original article upon which the book was based (1984) and the publication of the book itself, its applicability to the downtown arts scene was immediate. Most basically, the belief was that the economy was shifting to a post-industrial form of capitalism underpinned by an increasingly liberal form of American economic policy. The conclusion for the East Village arts in particular, in the 1980s was that as the economy shifted, so too did the art forms, in a correlated manner. Such changes could be exemplified by the shift away from 'anti-capitalist' art forms such as video, performance, and body art, to the more traditionally saleable objects such as painting and sculpture. The 'portability' of such objects encouraged the activity of collection as potential buyers could accrue material wealth in the traditional, moneymaking form with the benefit of being able to accommodate such works into their living environment making the whole process attractive and easy.

In addition, with the growth of the service sector came a fragmentation of the economy into small specialisms making, it was believed, the opportunities to challenge the dominance and growth of capitalism much more difficult. Equally, as Hal Foster (1985:13-32) had argued, art forms also fragmented into specialisms of sorts whereby there was no longer one dominant artistic framework but many small artistic niches. This phenomenon was labelled 'pluralism' and was criticised for providing the spectator and collector with the illusion of alternative viewpoints when actually it diffused any potential challenge to authority through its ability to provide safe niches for any discontents. In his article, "Against Pluralism", Foster explained that, "[a]rt exists today in a state of pluralism: no style or even mode of art is dominant and no critical position is orthodox. Yet this state is also a position, and this position is also an alibi...for in a pluralist state art and criticism tend to be dispersed and so rendered impotent." (13)<sup>2</sup> He then went on to link the state of the pluralist art world and capitalism à la Jameson by claiming that pluralism is not equivalent to social pluralism but is rather "based on a mode of production and information (often termed 'late-capitalism' or 'post-industrial') that is multinational." (30) In so doing, Foster argued that the rise of a particular mode of capitalism is necessarily coupled with the rise of the contemporaneous art movement.

However, as sociologist David Gartman (1998) has convincingly argued, Jameson's study along with others like it, lack the historical detail and precision to make their case stick. Once the concrete developments of both the arts and capitalism are contextually examined, Gartman found that, although there are links between the two, "a single synchronous development of economy and culture...distorts the actual diversities and discontinuities of developments between and within both realms." (120) As such, cultural and economic developments are neither necessarily nor inevitably correlated with the other's historical course. As can be exemplified in economic studies of different artistic movements, a high degree of variation can be found in their economic circumstances.<sup>3</sup> This variation, Michael North (1996:1-6) concluded, sheds serious doubt on strict correlations between

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<sup>1</sup> Quote taken from Lippard (1985:127).

<sup>2</sup> This article was originally published in 1982 in *Art in America*.



economic up- or downturns, such as that of the Lopez-thesis, which postulates that increases in cultural investment are to be found during periods of economic depression rather than economic prosperity.<sup>4</sup> As North has observed, those with money, be they elites or the middle classes, and who *choose* art for investment (since not all do), often retain their art works, even in slow economic circumstances. (6) If Jameson's postulations were correct, such correlations would be far more consistent.<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly, many of these problems can be found in the application of Jameson's theory to the downtown arts scene. With respect to Foster's specific claim about simulationist and commodity art, not only did the art market survive the stock market crash of 1987, its pinnacle is generally earmarked as 1989. The downfall came mid-way through 1990 and into 1991 and was largely linked to scandals associated with the borrowing and lending practices of Japanese companies. Furthermore, as seen in Brandon Taylor's (1995) examination of contemporary art, many 1980s commodity sculptors, such as Swiss artist Sylvie Fleury, have continued working into the nineties (92-94). Koons himself was the subject of a major retrospective in 1992 and continues to be featured in articles, documentaries, and news reports.<sup>6</sup>

On a more general level, though, positions, similar to Foster's, that asserted that the ascendancy of the downtown artists of New York were directly attributable to the purse strings of greedy speculators, equally lacked the nuanced understanding of the interrelated forces that shaped events at the time and were often overly influenced by the sensationalist reports of extravagance at the time. For one thing, the number of 'pure' speculators versus those with other motivations is exceptionally hard to determine given the secrecy that often surrounds art collecting. Given the significant drop in the top marginal rate of tax from 70 per cent to 50 per cent implemented by the Reagan administration, which would have affected those whose income allowed for significant consumption of original artworks, the incentive to purchase works for tax relief would have decreased as there was less need for the previous use of art investment as a tax shelter. Also, as most studies of returns on art investments conclude, there is usually little money to be made. In fact, the prices of art on average grew "steadily but unspectacularly" from the period between 1975 and 1985, the precise period that saw the rise of the downtown arts scene. (Heilbrun

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, see North (1996).

<sup>4</sup> For the formulation of this thesis, see Robert Lopez (1959) "Hard Times and Investment in Culture," in Dannenfeldt, K.H. ed. *The Renaissance: Medieval or Modern?* New York: Heath Series, 50-63. Reprinted in Anthony Molho, ed. (1969) *Social and Economic Foundations of the Italian Renaissance*. London: Wiley, 95-116.

<sup>5</sup> Jameson's theorisation of film has been subject to similar criticisms as those presented by Gartman in Michael Walsh's "Jameson and 'Global Aesthetics'", in Bordwell, D. and Carroll, N. eds. (1996) *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press: 481-500. The most serious problem with Jameson's claims is that his own attempt at historical contextualisation lacks accuracy. Rather than looking at American industry's effects on historically proximate American art, he often compares its developments in with European art, when American industry had yet to reach Europe. Likewise, European industry developed differently to that of the United States and thus would have had a different effect on its art. Historically-speaking, then, his theory is unhelpful when investigating the economics of art as it fails to provide a compelling evidence for a strict and global correlation between the development of capitalism and the art that supposedly reflects it.

<sup>6</sup> For an account of the downturn in the art market, see Watson (1992: chapter 41).



and Gray 1993:149) An increase in the number of collectors, then, would be attributable to other influences such as a means to accrue prestige rather than wealth, or simply fashion.

In addition to the problems raised by the correlation between the greedy Reaganite speculators and the rise of the downtown arts scene is the sheer timing of it all since it was already in formation prior to the influx of demand. Many artists within this loosely-knit community who became well known and well paid were actively engaged in the artistic activities of downtown New York before being 'discovered'. The fact that they became prominent artists relatively soon after they began (a phenomenon that was not as particular to the 1980s as it may first appear<sup>7</sup>) does not affect the fact that they had already set in place certain production practices that included entrepreneurialism and those adopted from the entertainment industry before any interest was shown by collectors. Nor did the adoption of such supposedly nefarious, capitalist practices entail a necessary success with collectors. Artists such as David Wojnarowicz, Ann Magnuson and Christy Rupp never reaped the instant monetary rewards of some of their fellow artists. Nonetheless, they played high-profile roles in the development of the downtown arts scene and participated in and encouraged the same activities as artists like Keith Haring or Jean-Michel Basquiat.

As Gartman concluded, simply rejecting the postulation that developments in art are synchronously linked to developments in capitalism or to its cycles of boom and bust, should not necessarily lead to a rejection of the notion that art and economics are interrelated, particularly in the 'postmodern' period. Indeed, it would be naïve to believe that there was no connection given that the production of downtown art occurred within a wider, capitalist, economic system, a system which has shaped the wider art market. Furthermore, it would be foolish to ignore the fact that the rise of these New York artists coincided with a marked change in the economy, which most economic historians date between 1973-74. But the artists of the late 1970s and 1980s, like artists of other periods, were subject to, and drew upon, certain economic circumstances and not others. Thus far, few studies have been done to pinpoint the aspects of the economic environment that affected the production of these works. Chapters 2, 3 and 4, therefore, aim to highlight some of the most important and proximate ones.

## I

The economy of the United States changed considerably during the decade between 1970 and 1980, and a number of factors converged to produce a grim vision of an uncertain economic future in the eyes of Americans at that time. The war in Vietnam as well as the oil crisis brought home the reality that the U.S. was vulnerable in the increasingly internationalised political and

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<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon is further discussed in Chapter 3.



economic environment.<sup>8</sup> Americans could no longer expect to dictate the terms of their international involvement, and, of course, the subsequent outcomes, as they had since World War II. At home, the picture seemed equally bleak as manufacturing, the backbone of the American economy, appeared to be sliding into a bottomless pit of negative growth and unemployment as industry lagged behind other countries in technological advances in production and became mired in internal disputes.

On top of this, the government, up to this point, had appeared fully in control of America's 'good times'. But after 1970, their power to control economic and political events began to be publicly perceived as non-existent. The various measures instituted throughout the decade to deal with the growing economic plight of Americans were shown over and over again to be ineffective. The news, as historian Kim McQuaid (1994:147-8) described, seemed pretty bleak:

The combined effect of war, social welfare entitlements, dilatory taxation, stagflation, aborted wage-price controls, panindustrial regulations, and the revolution in global energy costs was predictable: inflation on a scale never seen before in America in peacetime. Price indexes doubled between 1970 and 1980. Inflation was over 10 percent a year. Growth, meanwhile, slumped. By the middle of the decade, stagflation brought an unwelcome mixture of decreases in workers' purchasing power (through inflation) and unemployment rates of 10 percent (through stagflation). It was the 1960s politics of growth in reverse: instead of dividing gains, the 1970s apportioned scarcity.

As serious and devastating as these developments were to many U.S. businesses and workers alike, this story did not paint the complete picture. As McQuaid has pointed out, whilst manufacturing and oil were struggling, other sectors of the economy were beginning to grow at a rapid rate. That growth was to be found in the tertiary, or service, sector.<sup>9</sup> The service industry, although not providing anywhere near the level of both benefits and wages as the manufacturing industry, quickly expanded as it created or commercialised "previously non-marketed activities" and broke down and developed other activities in finer detail. (Harrington Jr. 1995:90) The cultivation of each specialisation extended the scope of various industries. Health care services, transportation, retail trade, and, most notably, financial services all began to grow at remarkable rates. And, as these new sectors grew, so did their involvement in the arts.

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<sup>8</sup> I hesitate to use the term 'global economy' for the same reasons as have been outlined by economic geographer, Peter Dicken (1998). He has claimed that whilst the world is subject to "globalizing forces", the economy cannot be said to be fully globalized. He highlighted the fact that what we are seeing is "a complex of inter-related *processes*" and that these "are highly uneven in time and space". (5) Instead, he pointed to an increased merging of *regionalised* economies or "localised geographical clusters", such as the European Union, which are still subject to varying degrees of individual state politics. I think this is important when understanding America's place in the international economy after 1970. Rather than their industries flowing smoothly out and through other's borders, they have to contend with the influence of other states on their own business expansion.

<sup>9</sup> There is, of course, much debate about what is to be included under the heading of 'tertiary'. Some economists have broken that category down into three – tertiary (personal and related services), quaternary (transport, commerce, communication, finance and administration), and quinary (medical care, education, research and recreation, which includes the arts) – to further specify the types of activity. (Kenessey 1987: 364n14) For my purposes, however, such distinctions are not necessary. And, as this breakdown is not always utilised in economic analyses (see Berry 1997), I shall equate the broader service sector with the term 'tertiary'.



The reasons for this put forward by scholars have ranged from art historical developments, economic policy, ideological motivations and individual agendas. Sociologist Rosanne Martorella (1990:22) concluded that certain artistic movements “encouraged industry to look at art more seriously” given their subject matter and material processes. Pop art’s interest in consumerism and Minimalism’s use of industrial processes and materials, for instance, laid out common ground between business and art. Another sociologist, Sharon Zukin (1989) concluded from her study on the role of ‘loft culture’ and urban regeneration in New York that the relationship between business and the arts was forged by people, namely the Rockefellers, who held simultaneous interests in business, politics and the arts. She argues that, as long-standing patrons of the arts, the Rockefellers saw the potential for the arts as a forum in which to push their economic and political agendas. Through their influence in both business and politics, they were able to push forward agendas that harnessed art in their interest. Art historian Richard Bolton (1998:29) pointed to studies done by Philip Morris that links their intended customer base with that of arts consumers as “well off, educated, owns real estate, travels frequently, and often dines out.” Similar to the conclusion reached by Zukin, Bolton viewed the active participation by business in the arts as an ideological one that he refers (ironically) as “enlightened self-interest”. And, both Martorella and Zukin pointed to tax advantages in place from the mid 1960s that encouraged business to invest in the arts.

It is not within the remit of this thesis to assess these claims. However all three, along with other scholars, sought to explain what became more evident as the decades of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century wore on – that there was an evident impact of corporate involvement on the arts. The aim of this chapter is to rebut the widely held assumptions that corporate service sector expansion had direct effects on the downtown arts scene. In order to do so, the study will be broken into two parts. The first will examine the corporate activities of both collection and sponsorship. It will be concluded that although the effects on the arts in general were significant, the effects on the downtown arts were limited to the broader effects that this had on the arts as a whole. The second part will address the correlation between corporate service sector expansion, urban regeneration or gentrification projects, and the arts. Several eminent sociologists and critics have made this connection, often with the conclusion that the downtown arts scene participants are responsible either intentionally or otherwise, for neighbourhood gentrification. In contrast, I will argue that not only was the development of this scene a result of the gentrification of other artistic neighbourhoods in Manhattan but also was a self-conscious *reaction* to the link between corporate culture and urban renewal.

## II

With the rapid expansion of the corporate service sector, and their highly visible involvement in the arts, many theorists, historians, critics, and even artists assumed that these two



related factors had a direct effect on the production of contemporary art. Art historian, Chin-tao Wu, in her 1998 article on recent corporate activity in the arts, claimed that “[i]n the 1970s, while continuing the generally passive role of being solicited for donations, businesses had begun to be active participants in the framing and shaping of the discourse of contemporary culture.” (29) Bolton (1998:26), with more specific reference to downtown artists, claimed that “[t]he art market, it seems, is one successful case of trickle down economics; a rising tide *has* lifted all boats” and points to the rising fortunes of artists like Haring, Scharf, Longo, Sherman and Kruger. And there is little doubt that corporate expansion generated significant income within the arts. Martorella estimated that anywhere from 20 to 30 percent of turnover in the contemporary art market was (as of 1990) generated by corporate buying with 60 percent of Fortune 500 companies collecting art. (14,54)

Despite this, corporate activity in the arts actually had less direct effect on the artists working within the general area of New York’s Lower East Side, at least initially, than is generally supposed. For one thing, corporate collections rarely housed art works produced by the scene’s participants. In her survey of collections, Martorella calculated that neo-expressionism, a category that incorporated some downtown art, amounts to only 2.7 percent of the total number of artworks.<sup>10</sup> Art administrators openly admitted that these works left employees, managers and clients alike unsettled and unhappy. The works were often considered too emotionally charged, garish, or “weird and unbelievable” to publicly display in their corporate environment as these features countered one main objective for collecting, which was to better internal relations. Also, many companies wishing to enhance their reputation locally and to engage in the community, preferred to opt for art that represented regional culture or supported indigenous artists. Supporting groups of artists viewed to be remote from the day to day lives of the community, like those in downtown New York City, would have proven to be alienating. The company’s local community would have seen their corporate allegiances as lying elsewhere and thus viewed the firm as an intruder rather than a vital member. On top of this, their sudden rise in the art world meant that many New York newcomer artists did not make it into corporate collections. These works were simply viewed as too risky and as “fads” whose shelf life was short. Only a very few of the New York neo-expressionists were represented in this domain, such as Julian Schnabel and David Salle, and even then, only in select collections. We can thereby conclude that the direct effect felt by this was not within emerging downtown art community.

Although corporations themselves were not avid collectors of downtown works, the expansion of the service sector did generate a new group of wealthy men and women eager to cement their social status in the collection and consumption of art. The effect of these groups has been noted in studies on many areas of art history. For instance, cultural economist Guido Guerzoni

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<sup>10</sup> Other contemporary ‘avant-garde’ movements also have equally poor standing including minimalism/conceptualism, pop art (both categories standing at 1.8 percent), and photorealism. Other more acclaimed artists such as Adolf Gottlieb, Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollack were beyond the financial grasp of most firms, and so also have an equally poor representation. (Martorella 1990:72)



(1996) has pointed to a shift in the type of collector in the British painting market when the first entrepreneurs appear. Whereas this wealth accrued through “iron and textiles, solvents, railways and shipyards” may have appeared crass to the elites of the time, this group enhanced their social standing by investing in art. (103) The Americans followed a similar path right from the rise of the first industrial entrepreneurs “with appetites and wealth which gave them a vastly superior purchasing power when compared with that of previous collectors.” (104) Like other such groups before them, the service industry giants aimed to raise themselves to the social level of respected and cultured businessmen and women. Heads of major service-oriented firms were often private patrons and collectors of the contemporary avant-garde, despite having a more conservative approach to collecting within the firms themselves. In addition, these heads often took up posts on the members’ boards of prestigious cultural institutions. Donald Marron, chairman of the brokerage firm PaineWebber, serves as such an example. He was described by Martorella as “a well-known, highly respected private collector” who played a key role in the early 1980s expansion of the Museum of Modern Art in his capacity as a trustee on its board. (139) Such active and high profile interest in contemporary American art, including that of neo-expressionism, made an impact in the amount of both publicity and income generated by these artists.

Of course, ascertaining exactly who bought what from the various developments in downtown art is difficult. Collectors often preferred to remain anonymous whilst dealers closed their books to the general public. However, from the available information it is clear that many of the buyers were new to art collection, often relatively young, from the service and leisure sectors of the economy and who gravitated towards contemporary, even fashionable, art works. For instance, a young attorney, Jim Stark, with \$4000 to invest, became the backer for Gracie Mansion’s gallery, which opened in the spring of 1982. (Frank and McKenzie 1987:136) Another early collector, Bodi, made his money in commercial photography. A notable group of Mark Kostabi’s collectors were from the echelons of the entertainment business, such as Hollywood producers, Daniel Melnick, Ray Stark, Norman Lear, Rodney Sheldon, and Aaron Spelling. And, a 1992 profile of major international collectors in *ARTnews* can be seen to link the buyers of American contemporary art to this new business domain. The wealth they represented, like that of the previous examples, comes from those area of expansion in the tertiary sector such as wholesale and retail trade, legal services, and recreation. They also ranged in age from 29 to 45 years old. Their collections focused, in large part, on art produced from 1970 onwards (including many names from the burgeoning New York art scenes from the late 1970s and 1980s), and had been active collectors for at least 10 years at that point. From this information, we can conclude that money derived by individuals operating within the growing and more prominent service sector, arts and leisure in particular, was channelled, at least partially, into the New York art movements gaining prominence in the late 1970s and 1980s. At its most basic level, then, service sector growth provided the art world with a new set of potential patrons interested in the art of its time.



One should be cautious, though, about suggesting that these collectors directly *shaped* downtown arts production as has been claimed, if not implied, by many critics of the period. As I have highlighted, many collectors appeared only after the development of the arts scene on the Lower East Side. Many artists had moved to and were working in the area by 1976, and by 1979, the 'scene' may be said to have been in full swing. The first commercial gallery, however, did not appear until the Fun Gallery opened in the autumn of 1981, with the largest proliferation of commercial galleries only following suit in 1983 and 84. Certainly the broad-scale sales do not seem to happen until the summer of 1983 when the galleries of the East Village chose to stay open whilst those of other 'art districts' closed. Most of the buyers at the time were largely friends and affiliates of the scene itself. Even the sales from the first year of Fun Gallery's exhibitions were from friends of the artists (as in the case of the gallery's first show of work by Steven Kramer) or else were complete commercial flops (as was the case with their second show of work by Kenny Scharf). This is not to say, of course, that there were no outside collectors since there clearly were, such as Dolores and Hubert Neumann who were wealthy collectors of graffiti work early on in its East Village/South Bronx manifestations. Rather, the presence of collectors on the large scale that came to characterise the 1980s did not occur until after the development of many of the production practices and artistic manifestations of the period were in place.

Aside from collecting, the second indirect effect of service sector growth on the New York art scene of the time was the increased level of sponsorship to arts events provided by growing corporations. The reasons for such sponsorship tended to remain relatively constant and have been outlined as the following (O'Hagan and Harvey 2000): promotion of name and image in which sponsored event is not necessarily linked directly to the sponsor's product; supply-chain cohesion, where the arts event is more closely linked with employees and/or suppliers rather than clients; rent-seeking, which constitutes either the direct lobbying of decision makers (direct rent-seeking) or "altering the environment in which decisions affecting the company are made" (indirect rent-seeking); non-monetary benefit to managers or owners, which enhances the personal consumption of the firm's upper echelons. These reasons, then, guide the company's decisions of which events to sponsor.

Predictably, sponsorship funds tended to be allocated to well-established museums, either in the form of blockbuster exhibitions (particularly after the landmark show "Treasures of Tutankhamun" at the National Gallery of Art held 17<sup>th</sup> November 1976 to 15<sup>th</sup> March 1977) or sponsored wings and branches. Like the collections, these choices tended to lean on the conservative side given the types of institutions patronised. Edward M. Strauss Jr., president of the Business Committee for the Arts, expressed this attitude when he said "[Museums] generally are relatively free of controversy, so this is one of the solid, stable activities a corporation can support without any real concern." (Sloane 1980:113) Also like collecting, the intention for taking a conservative approach may be found in the reasons for sponsorship themselves. All of the reasons



listed above involve pleasing (or placating) groups of people with diverse and often conservative taste, both in the office and in the public domain. Shows such as “The Vikings” and “The Search for Alexander” (the Great) were likely to generate interest and excitement from a broad range of people including the media.

Not all sponsorship followed this path, though, precisely for the first listed reason – that of public relations. In these cases, emphasis was often placed on shows and venues with attention-grabbing value found particularly in the realm of contemporary art. Special exhibitions focusing on what’s up and coming, like the Exxon-financed exhibition “British Art Now – An American Perspective” (1980), provided companies with the image of being ‘cutting-edge’. Lynne Sowder, an arts programme co-ordinator for First Banks Systems, described the benefit of aligning the company with adventurous and controversial contemporary art as serving as “both a symbol and a tool for the redefinition of the corporate culture.” (cited in Martorella 1990:38) In addition to shows, monies also went directly to contemporary institutions such as the Guggenheim and the Whitney directly. Both of these institutions were able to provide free entry one evening a week due to grants from the Mobil Corporation. In addition to museums, festivals of contemporary art, like *Documenta* and the Whitney Biennial also provided companies with outlets for promotion. These shows offered even more leeway for ‘acceptable’ controversy than regular exhibitions. In an examination of the economics of special exhibitions and festival, cultural economist Bruno Frey (2000:82) explains that “[f]estivals may well specialise in an audience honoring unorthodoxy, excellence and special tastes” without relying upon the approval of a wider public.<sup>11</sup>

Most of the downtown artists, however, did not benefit directly from this sponsorship, at least initially. These shows, museums, and festivals still exhibited established artists on the whole, and waited for dealer and collector approval before endorsing a new artist. Nonetheless, the impact on the art world would be felt by all. Corporate sponsorship, most basically, generated enormous amounts of publicity for the arts, given that a main objective was PR. Arts activities, events and festivals became increasingly familiar to the wider public. Attendance for these events also started to grow rapidly as interest in them took hold from both the public and the media. The environment for fostering arts appreciation, particularly that of specialised tastes, expanded. Also, with the overwhelming success of these events, more money flowed into other events vying for a place in the art world spotlight. With more events came greater opportunity for newly recognised artists, including many from the downtown scene, to enter into recognised art world circles more rapidly and in greater numbers. Both Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, for example, had shown at *Documenta* by 1982, only a few years after they began working as artists. As we will see, the increased attention and opportunity created an environment of excitement and activity from which the artists under consideration were able to benefit.



Overall, though, the main impact of corporate collecting and sponsorship activity, on the formation of the arts scene on the Lower East Side was limited. As was mentioned with regard to collecting, most of the more direct connections between downtown artists and corporate patronage began once artists moved into the mainstream art world and were recognised by museums and other art world institutional bodies such as the *Documenta* board. Such results were noticeable only after 1982, and coincide with a broader range of media attention, from broadsheet newspapers, gossip magazines along with the standard array of art criticism forums that began to focus on the East Village in particular. Even so, there is conflicting evidence about the degree to which corporations actually became involved with the downtown art scene. Certainly Bolton (1998) painted the picture that their takeover of this art scene was all-pervasive pointing to the purchase of works by Chase Manhattan Bank, Philip Morris and First Bank System, and even, with much incredulity, the acquisition of Schnabel and Longo's work by the junk food manufacturing giant, Frito-Lay. Wu (1998:29) as well, claimed that "[w]hat was new in the 1980s was that this active involvement [of business in the arts] became ubiquitous and comprehensive." Martorella, on the other hand, found a lack of significant representation of (her broad category of) neo-expressionists in her study on the make up of corporate collections. She claimed that once this work became popular with private collectors in the early 1980s, the prices were driven up beyond the usually rather modest budgets that most corporations had allocated for the purchase of art. In addition, she quite rightly claimed that the dealers representing these artists often shunned corporate collectors since the majority of their collections were made up of regional artists and posters and were not of significant prestige value. It would be easy to overstate the significance of corporate collectors in view of the few megalithic investors like Philip Morris whose presence and budget may obscure the reality of the majority of corporate collecting.

Certainly sponsorship and collaboration in advertising seem to be the more noticeable influences in the production and exhibition of downtown artists. Bolton pointed to a number of instances where artists work together with companies on their advertising campaigns either producing commissioned art work, as in the case of Haring and Absolut vodka (Fig. 1), or posing themselves for the campaign, or both, as in the case of Cindy Sherman and Issey Miyake and Comme des Garçons (Fig. 2). And certainly, many downtown artists began to participate in corporate sponsored events such as *Documenta*, and showed work in corporate sponsored galleries and museum wings.

To reiterate the point about this relationship between contemporary art and business, much of it developed after the rise of the downtown arts scene for two main reasons. First, many of these artists were big, or at least up-and-coming, names before being involved in corporate arts activity

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<sup>11</sup> I am not trying to claim that corporate sponsorship is unproblematic. However, space here does not permit a lengthy analysis of the pros and cons of corporate involvement. For discussion of some of the negative repercussions, see Sloane



and did not gain any significant recognition until after interest by the mainstream press was registered in roughly 1982-83. Also, as both Bolton and Wu recognised, corporate involvement in the arts grew throughout the 1980s, having started off the decade in a patchy and somewhat reactive (as opposed to proactive) fashion. The significance of these points lies not in any conclusion that corporate involvement in the arts had no impact on contemporary artists. Rather by understanding the link between corporate expansion in the service sector and their activity in the arts, a link that greatly affected many aspects of art, we can conclude that it did not have any substantial *direct* impact on the development of the downtown arts production practice.

### III

The most influential and dramatic effect of corporate expansion in the service sector on downtown artists came not through its activity in the art world but rather through the urban renewal programs that were co-sponsored by business and local politicians. In an effort to 'clean up' areas of urban decay, municipal planning commissions across the country mapped out strategies to transform them from ones of crime and poverty to ones of economic and cultural vitality. The idea was to attract businesses as well as residents back to the city centres after years of flights to the suburbs. The common pattern found in such plans began with the neglect and subsequent devaluation of government-owned real estate in these areas. These sites were then sold to real estate developers. The interest in these urban areas shown by developers stemmed from a growing demand for prime urban locations by expanding businesses and their higher-income employees.<sup>12</sup> Many of these companies, large or small, wanted newly refurbished or newly constructed premises.

The demand stemmed from two related developments in the expansion of the service sector. The first was from the expansion of the businesses themselves, particularly the large firms looking to establish new, impressive headquarters. As Martorella observed, "Business expenditures for new plant and equipment rose...with finance and insurance, business services, and communication industries spending 300 to 500 percent more on construction over that period [1975 to 1985]." (52) Most important, however, was their strategic location in urban centres. Not only were services best situated in concentrated populations so as to have access to as many potential customers as possible<sup>13</sup>, but as newly dominant industries, their importance was best established in areas of high visibility especially through the media.

Second, developers also saw the potential to capitalise on the growing interest of corporate employees to take up residence in urban rather than suburban areas. Where living in the suburbs was once viewed as the preferred location of residence, now, living close to work, avoiding

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(1980), Walker (1984), Zolberg (1996) and Waterman (1998). For discussion of the benefits, see Cowen (1998).

<sup>12</sup> It goes without saying that developers, on the whole, are ultimately motivated to generate profit. Here I am outlining where they saw that source of potential profits.



commuting time on overcrowded trains and subways, and living in the hub of activity, gained greater appeal. Like the offices sought by the emergent corporate giants, these often highly paid professionals wanted new or refurbished urban residences but with all the all the benefits that had been afforded to them in the suburbs, namely safety, cleanliness and convenience. As the corporate presence grew, smaller businesses offering services such as dining and shopping opened to cater to the new (wealthy) employees and residents. And they were willing to pay for it. Developers, then, could take supposedly underused land and turn it into prime real estate, at the same time as 'cleaning up' derelict areas of the city.

But what was urban renewal for some was gentrification – or the replacement of a lower class with a more affluent one – for others. The result of the influx of these businesses and new residents was the predictable, at best, or deliberate, at worst, displacement of the low-income residents. Certainly those moving in had little interest in sharing their streets with others who, to them, were perpetrators of the poverty and crime they were trying to eradicate. These new residents were looking instead to reinforce the images of riches and success via the environment that they inhabited.

A part of reshaping the image of the neighbourhood was the development of cultural tourism, the practice of drawing people from the suburbs into city centres for leisure activities. Tourism of this kind, economically speaking, had the potential to generate income on a continuous basis, not only during corporate working hours. The arts had the right ingredients for these requirements. For a start, viewing galleries and attending events and festivals was relatively low cost to the spectator and had a high media profile so as to draw in those people who might not otherwise take an interest in the arts. An excellent example of this is the development of SoHo during the late 1960s and 1970s. In an effort to generate approval for their residency in the waning manufacturing district, artists began a street festival in which studios opened up their doors every Saturday to suburbanites who were taking in the area's activities. Here, people came into the urban areas to see contemporary works first hand who might have otherwise stayed at home. In addition, the arts activity also reinforced the status of those corporate urbanites who lived in the area. As Thomas Frank (1997:53-60) has observed with respect to developments in the world of corporate advertising, businessmen and women no longer wanted to be seen as stiff-suited 'yes men'. The image of the corporate worker shifted to that of renegade, as individuals with creativity. Living in an 'artist neighbourhood' aided in reinforcing such a change in perception.

Such a connection between the arts and urban development/gentrification has been widely recognised by academics who have examined the structures at work in such processes. The two key academic studies on the subject are Zukin (1989) and Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel

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<sup>13</sup> I suspect that the widespread use of the internet has lessened the need for such strategic placement in terms of customer base for some service industries, although I am not aware of any studies that conclusively demonstrate this.



Ryan (1987). In her study, Zukin argued that politicians and business co-opted the arts in an effort to stem potential class or racial unrest in urban areas. Through state and business support of the arts, they aimed to create service sector jobs, thereby injecting money into the problems of youth unemployment. Furthermore, by supporting an arts culture and artists' communities, particularly with regard to the practice of "loft-living", they could strategically shape "smoldering urban ghettos". (107) Lofts played a major role in this process since they were not just housing but were a crucial element in a 'cultured lifestyle' that was seen to counter and displace any possible dissidents. The threat to both politicians and business from the potential urban chaos "made wider support for the arts appear to be an urgent response to potentially severe social problems." Politicians and business leaders then implemented these plans, using regulation and rising housing market prices to drive out unwanted residents and usher in a cultured crowd.

Deutsche and Ryan, in their study on the Lower East Side, argued along similar lines that political and business interests superseded those of disenfranchised urban residents. They highlighted the significance of the proposed Artist Homeownership Programme drafted in August 1981 by mayor Ed Koch's administration that allotted new and redeveloped housing specifically for "moderate income artists", the prices of which started well beyond the means of the local Hispanic population. The gist of their argument was that politicians and business aimed to displace the 'underclass' and working class with a segment of the middle class who would reinforce capitalist values and support the interests of power, namely art world players. "It is not a case of mistaken class identity for the people of the Lower East Side to place artists and professionals in the same social category." (162)

Both studies conveyed serious concern over the role of the art world and of artists in this process, but Deutsche and Ryan expressed outright hostility since they place the responsibility of the gentrification process squarely on the shoulders of the artists and gallery owners themselves. They claimed that "The influx of artists in the late '70s and the opening of galleries in the early '80s constituted the first moment in the sustained process of the lower East Side's gentrification." (163) They went on to liken the attitude of the artists and gallerists toward the Lower East Side to the Zionists' of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who viewed Palestine as unpopulated. They further disregarded the protests made by both artists and critics that the area was already slated for renewal and would have happened with or without the developments of the art scene, implying that if those members of the art world had any conscience, they would have moved elsewhere. What is clear, then, is that they held particularly the East Village artists directly responsible for furthering the gentrification of the Lower East Side.

Ultimately Deutsche and Ryan's argument was a political issue that will be examined in greater detail in chapter 6. But the critics' claims about the role of artists in the gentrification of the Lower East Side misconstrued the position of those artists in relation to gentrification and its



connection to corporate expansion. Whilst there is no doubt that both studies provided insight into the use of the arts against underprivileged people, and that some factions of the art world are complicit with this process, the artists of the Lower East Side in the late 1970s and early 1980s were not only displaced themselves by the earlier gentrification of SoHo and the Village but were directly reacting to gentrification and its underlying corporate basis of middle class values. In other words, the impact of corporate expansion through gentrification can be seen most clearly in the reaction *against* rather than the encouragement of this process.

On the most basic level, regeneration and gentrification in Manhattan had an immediate effect on shaping the downtown scene since it priced artists with little income out of the established and active artist communities such as SoHo, the West Village and, to a lesser extent, Tribeca. Like the Artists Homeownership Programme, artists' residences and co-ops that had been developed through the 1970s were often aimed at artists with significant income, thus excluding many young and 'undiscovered' artists who could not afford the skyrocketing rents in this area. The result was that artists could neither set up studios nor find affordable housing and so had to find a new area in which to work. One possibility may have been to relocate to the suburbs or other middle class areas as was suggested as the ethical choice by Deutsche and Ryan.<sup>14</sup> However, there are significant structural reasons why this did not occur.

To start, artists understandably gravitated to Manhattan since it already possessed a significant art world infrastructure. Studies of the arts in major American metropolitan centres using the economic concept of agglomeration shed light on the economic necessity of such a phenomenon. Here, urban economic studies examine "spatially-relevant aspects of the US economy" where the site of labour, supply services, and output demand of any particular industry are investigated in terms of its growth or decline with reference to its geographic location. (Netzer 1992:251) Economies of agglomeration, then, are the phenomena in which industries and their supply services are necessarily concentrated in one central place. The reason for this concentration was explained by economist, James Heilbrun (1992:206), in the following way: "[Economies of agglomeration] are the savings in unit cost that accrue to certain kinds of firms when a large enough number of them locate to the same city. The savings usually occur because the firms are able to share a common pool of highly specialised inputs, the very existence of which depends on there being a concentration of local buyers." New York, then, can be viewed in terms of such a concept since, historically, it has served as a locational centre point for artists, dealers, museums and even collectors. Interestingly, the number of painters and sculptors in America's ten largest metropolitan centres diminished, New York's percentage dropping most notably from fifteen to ten, according to the study conducted by Heilbrun from 1970 to 1980. As Heilbrun (209) observed:

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<sup>14</sup> This was made particularly evident when they approvingly quoted a campaigner for the area who suggested that art world people should move out of the East Village. (164)



Painters and sculptors, in the language of location theory, are much more 'footloose'. They need not live close to the particular gallery that handles their work. A few visits a year are probably enough to maintain the relationship. Consequently, as transportation has improved, some visual artists have moved to more congenial or less expensive locations.

However, the suburb option was better suited to artists who already had art world contacts and who could afford the cost of transporting work into the urban centres for exhibition. They did not rely on the proximity of an artistic community for both economic and social support. As a result, only certain artists, like those already affiliated with a gallery or with an established reputation, could afford to move away from the benefits of industry staples concentrated all in one area. Unknown, low-wage artists with no access to extra funds *required* a central point for artistic engagement that could provide a maximum amount of support and encouragement whilst incurring minimal expense since they had yet to establish their reputations either with dealers, collectors or critics. For these artists, central place functions of the art industry play a vital role. So, New York, with its well-developed arts infrastructure, was a logical place for artists to expect to begin their careers.

Furthermore, although suburbs were relatively lower cost than gentrified urban areas, living there still required more money than living in a neglected urban area. By the 1970s, however, there were few urban areas left on the island that had not already been or were being subjected to urban renewal. One of the few was the Lower East Side, and although politicians and developers had their eye on the area for future renewal plans, their attentions lay elsewhere at that point in time. This meant that rents were affordable, and vacancy rates were high enough to accommodate large numbers of artists. They could all afford the living, working or rehearsing space that they required to carry out their artistic production in proximity to one another. Escaping the economic effects of gentrification whilst still staying close to art world structures and one another, then, played a major role in the development of the artistic community in downtown New York.

The Lower East Side also had specific allure since the area already had a history of artistic activity. As art historian and curator Irving Sandler (1984:10) recounted: "The list of tenants reads like a *Who's Who* of American art in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century." According to Sandler, not only did artists live there, but exhibitions were held, art was bought and sold, receptions were held and spectators came to take in the latest art in that vicinity. One hundred years later, in the 1950s, the artistic community had changed but was still active on the Lower East Side. "10<sup>th</sup> Street's appeal extends back in time to 1957, the year in which the 10<sup>th</sup> Street Studio Building between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue was opened...." Residences, studios and co-operative exhibition spaces all proliferated in the area over the next decade or so, and the many experimental art forms such as performance, environmental works, film, music and dance generated there made the neighbourhood "the geographic hub of the avant-garde art world." (11) The area, in fact, was known at the time as the East Village, and its status as an artistic community was cemented by the publication of its own underground newspaper during the 1960s, *The East Village Other*.



The East Village lost many of its artistic residents, briefly, however, due to the growth of SoHo as a happening artistic centre. But the history and legacy of its artistic community, along with the enduring underground music scene located there, was to draw artists back once again in a way that Staten Island, for example, never could have. The artists who moved into the area were not bursting in on a previously 'untouched' immigrant neighbourhood but re-entering an old artistic stomping ground that was flourishing not a decade before, where both the working class residents and artists had lived side by side. The Lower East Side, then, had key ingredients that would attract artists looking to escape the rising costs of living in a "renewed" SoHo – cheap rents and an artistic history.

#### IV

Escaping gentrification was not just about the cost of living, nor was the appeal of the Lower East Side solely based on artistic heritage. Artists understood the connection between corporate interests and the project of urban renewal. They also understood that implicit in the thinking of such projects was the desire to sweep away the decay that had developed after years of neglect. Artists saw the clean white SoHo aesthetic as mirroring the values of urban cleanliness, order and corporate rationality. This understanding was not always or even commonly explicitly stated. But the artists who migrated to the Lower East Side/South Bronx shared a common rejection of the corporate culture that underpinned the whole gentrification process and embraced the aspects of the area that stood in contrast to such culture. Given the common belief about the complicity of these artists with gentrification, these claims may seem hard to accept. As we will see, however, their reactions to gentrification supported by corporate culture can be identified in various manifestations of the artistic practices that emerged within the community.

Some overt political activity with respect to corporate-supported gentrification by artists on the Lower East Side was notable. Artists' groups, particularly the co-operative ABC No Rio Dinero and the organisation PADD, directly addressed the gentrification of the Lower East Side. In fact, the entire foundation of ABC No Rio was built on this very concern and was borne out in the Colab-initiated exhibition, the "Real Estate Show", held in an illegally occupied abandoned commercial site in 1980. The splinter group that eventually formed ABC No Rio stated that the show "was all about the way money controls where and how people live in New York City in general, and the Lower East Side in particular." (Weichselbaum 1985:52) Similarly, shows such as the multiply-sited and repeated exhibitions *Not For Sale* (1983-84) sponsored by PADD were centred on the issue of Lower East Side displacement and gentrification during the next several years. The works in all of these shows were explicit in their political objectives. Some artists simply pinned up facts about the city's activity in low-income areas in an effort to both expose the political underhandedness involved in such development. The connection between gentrification and the media was also made in posters that played on certain advertising conventions. In Fig. 3 the successful businessman holding up a



traveller's cheque in what appears to have been an American Express advert, is transformed by artist Andy Baird into a menacing and deceitful financier. Below, another character is transformed into an almost cartoonish evil being with the power to hypnotise. Given the text below, we can infer that this character represents the media who are criticised for being complicit at best in aiding the corporate and political agendas.

The very site in which these artists chose to launch the shows also played an intervening role in the gentrification issue since the show was not only a display of political opinions but was also expressed through their very exhibition practice. In the case of the *Real Estate Show* (1980), the artists involved on the Committee for the *Real Estate Show* (CRES) chose a city-owned building that had been deliberately neglected. Its deterioration stood as evidence of the government's sales strategy to lower the value of a site thereby encouraging developers' interest through deliberate neglect. By holding the show at one of these sites, artists directed attention to the state of the area rather than cocooning the issue in a gallery 'space', isolating the viewer from the outside context. The committee organising the multiple *Not For Sale* exhibitions chose ABC No Rio as one site and the El Bohio community centre, a site managed by CHARAS, a Latino-based organisation, in so doing, aligning themselves against the commercial powers at work in the area.

Furthermore, the illegal occupation of the Delancey Street building by the *Real Estate Show* added a further dimension of political dissent that the artists felt was lacking in the public arena. Although CRES did pursue the bureaucratic route to secure the site, offering to pay rent for its use and to carry out the maintenance work required to make it functional themselves, the city claimed that the site was already slated for development although no work was being carried out on it. The refusal of the city to consent to the use of the building, and the subsequent decision of the artists to break into the site indicated that the artists were not simply politically vocal on the issue, but introduced political activism into artistic practice on the issue of Lower East Side gentrification.

Nor was all the interest in the political issues of gentrification generated by co-operative groups. Some individual artists also engaged in political artistic work focusing on the issue. John Fekner, in one project, used words stencilled on deteriorating neighbourhood walls describing the state of low-income areas as a method to bring these concerns into the public domain. These works raised the question of responsibility, particularly when viewed by both community members and outsiders, particularly those in a position of power as in Fig. 4 and Fig. 5. Although only a fortuitously captured moment in the South Bronx, the associative relationship between Reagan, the stencilled words and the physical context of the dilapidated area, attributes responsibility for urban decay to those in power, and accuses the political machinery of an active policy of neglect.<sup>15</sup> Artist

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<sup>15</sup> Significantly, it was also through a policy of neglect that the Reagan administration hoped to achieve his aim of dismantling the state apparatus. The administration starved departments of funds, particularly those dealing with welfare, health and safety issues, and let them dwindle into unsustainable bodies that were then scrapped. For account of this process, see Johnson (1991:187-92).



Rebecca Howell used repeated motifs, such the octopus and its far-reaching tentacles coiled around buildings and cash, in her effort to expose the connection between corporate financing and the city. The site-specific sculpture *The Real Estate Octopus and Manhattan as a Dead Horse* from 1983 was placed in an abandoned lot, neglected buildings surrounding it. The two layers of reference in the work to the neighborhood in which it was placed, and to Manhattan in general, reveals the concern over gentrification across district boundaries. Her *Oil Rig* (1980) at the infamous *Times Square Show* (1980), placed the responsibility of the low-income New Yorkers' plight at the feet of the high-rolling oil entrepreneurs who were vocal financial supporters of the Reagan administration. In both cases, these artists broadened the political campaign beyond special interest exhibitions and groups.

The examples so far concentrate on the direct statements aimed at revealing corporate interests and their involvement in gentrification. Others with the political aim of aligning themselves against corporations did so by directing their energies toward support and interaction with local communities. Although interested in these political issues, Group Material, another co-operative group formally operational in 1981, took a different approach to what may be considered its counterpart, ABC No Rio. They believed that "you can create something politically and socially without having an overt message. I think the fact that a work has a message is almost never going to work. It tries to preach something. But if it has an idea behind it, then that is different." (Hall 1983/84:5) Rather, Group Material's stated objective was to pursue "a more inclusive and democratic vision for art..." (Group Material 1985:22), which took the form of active and positive, community engagement. For instance, one of their first and most noted shows was *Arroz con Mango*. Local residents were asked to contribute something of personal significance to the show. The exhibition's main function was to include residents who otherwise would remain outside of the gallery institution in the art world process. It also challenged (object) value as accrued within the art world by allowing the value to be determined by others not in privileged positions. Other shows, like *Unforgettable Moments* and *Tube World* held at ABC No Rio, and other groups, such as PADD and the South Bronx gallery, Fashion/Moda, pursued similar agendas in which they attempted to adapt their gallery policies and artistic practice in order to contribute to a positive, and yet political, engagement with local communities.<sup>16</sup>

Again, organised groups were not the only links between artists and local residents. Individual artists also took active roles in community engagement. A project by Colab member, Jenny Holzer, called for community political action in her anonymous 1984 flyer campaign. One read, for example, "Put food out in the same place everyday and talk to people who come to eat and organize them." Through these publicly-posted statements, she urged the reader (who was most likely a neighbourhood resident) to become actively involved in his or her community by engaging with those who were underprivileged, providing them with support, and uniting the

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<sup>16</sup> Not coincidentally, the founder of Fashion/Moda, Stefan Eins, had worked with the founding group of ABC No Rio.



community in a common cause. That common cause was understood to be the political and corporate agendas operating in poor areas.<sup>17</sup> Anton van Dalen also used flyers in his active engagement with the community, only this time to directly target the destructive effect of drug activity in low-income communities. In this project, known by the flyers' title, *Shooting Gallery* (1982) the artist pasted his flyers over the holes through which drug dealers would pass drugs to buyers. His project was aimed to actively intervene in the illegal activity that debased the neighbourhood. However, he did so in an effort to tackle the problem as a resident, not a developer. The method used by politicians to 'clean-up' ghettos was to drive out *all* residents, based on their inability to financially contribute to corporate class lifestyles. Instead, the *Shooting Gallery* project highlighted the distinction between the wants and needs of low-income, law-abiding residents who wanted a safe environment in which to raise their families and those of drug-dealers.

Artists who lived in the area further developed this perspective of the resident. Van Dalen, in conjunction with his informational work such as the "Soweto-Loisaida" slide show and discussion (1984) and other directly targeted pieces such as his mural entitled *Lower East Side: Portal to America* (1980), were works that portrayed aspects of the neighbourhoods affected by deliberate deterioration. In his drawing, *Night Street* (1976), the scene is set on the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue A. The image depicts desertion and anonymity through its barred and bricked up windows, abandoned car and television. The streets are empty barring a prostitute walking a dog and a passing car. However, we can see neither the face of the woman, nor the face of the driver, suggesting a secretive or even illegal dimension to their presence. Jane Dickson also depicts similar urban scenes in her snapshot paintings of crime-ridden areas such as *Paradise Alley* (1983), *Peep Land* (1984) and *Frisking* (1983) (Fig. 6). As with van Dalen's *Night Street*, the viewer looks down on scenes that appear to be from an apartment window above, as if it were the view of a resident in the area depicted (which, not incidentally, they both were). The attitudes toward figures in the images done by van Dalen and Dickson, though, are different. *Night Street* seems to isolate the viewer from the woman and driver, creating a sense that the resident/viewer regards those on the street as unwelcome. However, Dickson's figures, contextually implicated in illegal activity, appear more morally ambiguous, if not sympathetic, than is suggested in van Dalen's rather sinister depiction. The two figures bent over the side of the road, another lighting a cigarette, and the two being frisked, appear not as faceless perpetrators of crime, but as humans trapped in the ghetto. My aim here is not to advocate one view over another, since both were undoubtedly present amongst area residents. Rather, these works show that the artists attempted to position themselves not as outsiders, but as residents of the area, engaging in the concerns of the communities.

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<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that the flyers were not referring to any community in particular, although there is an element of site-specific-ness depending on the site posted and the site in which they were read. However, as the issues of gentrification were being discussed in relation to many poor communities at the time, their general call for political action would most likely have been read minimally in terms of all of New York City's boroughs if not on a broader scale.



The unifying factor in these different projects and works is that in each case the artist or artists were aligning themselves with the community. They were trying to erase the boundaries between themselves and the communities in which they worked by creating relationships through a melding of artistic projects and community needs. Group Material, for instance, conceived of its function as a community centre rather than a gallery. They offered art-educational programmes for local youth, exhibitions and even a Spanish-language advice service on rent negotiations in their effort to accommodate residents. Other individual artists pursued issues as concerned residents. In all cases, siding with the community was a deliberate choice. The implicit, and sometimes explicit, hope was to strengthen the resistance to the encroaching corporate expansion at the expense of those who were not part of that culture.

As Deutsche and Ryan (1987) were quick to point out, the direct political engagement by artists with reference to the communities targeted for gentrification was limited, although more numerous and vocal than the critics imply. What was more apparent in the wider spectrum of downtown art was a reaction to that encroaching corporate expansion and the values that lay behind the gentrification project, a prevalent position amongst artists that was overlooked by Deutsche and Ryan. Although most of the co-operative groups mentioned, their landmark exhibitions, and the work of the individual artists that related specifically to community issues, appeared largely after 1980, signs of the rebellion against corporate culture were evident in the very shape of the artistic community on the Lower East Side - in their choices, practices and works.

These values were not hard to define since the surge in corporate expansion made this ideology hard to avoid. Mike Glier's 1979 work, *Values*, spelled out many. The painted words 'POWER', 'RICHES', and 'GLORY' are all easily identified with the ideology that informed corporate culture. The words are deliberately blunt, leaving little to the imagination. They are also painted on club-like planks of wood indicating the brute-force with which people are inculcated with these values. Such was the vision of corporate doctrine. Furthermore, these values were seen to be tied into the gentrification process undertaken by corporations and politicians. *Values*, for example, was exhibited at the *Real Estate Show*, thus underlining the ideology that informed 'urban renewal'.

Most works defining themselves against the encroachment of corporate values were not so explicit. Broadly speaking, the oppositional stance taken by artists can be understood, on one significant level, in terms of opposition between urban and suburban. As mentioned, the service sector's expansion into the downtown high-rises of metropolitan areas also entailed an influx of corporate employees who no longer wanted to commute. Once the suburb was a sign of status, now the commuting time made it a dead weight around the neck of many executives. Nonetheless, suburbs continued to reflect the middle-class values of those working within the corporate environment. The streets were clean and safe, the neighbourhood was quiet and orderly, and the design was rational and repetitive. Urban neighbourhoods, by that time, were associated with the



opposite – lawlessness, chaos and filth – and, the problems of arson, drug dealing and usage, and prostitution all contributed to this image. Those looking to move downtown, both businesses and middle- and upper middle-class individuals were not looking to forego the qualities of the suburbs. Instead they wanted to bring them into the cities.

The challenge by artists to those corporate/suburban values began with a valorisation and love of the city rather than the suburb. Musician Vincent Gallo (cited in Hoban 1990:313) recalled the antics of himself and Jean-Michel Basquiat in the city early on in their careers. “We used to go to Wall Street every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night, till like five in the morning, because it was deserted then. We’d do graffiti, make some tapes. We used to cry thinking about how beautiful New York was. We always used to say, ‘I want to die right here. I want all the buildings to crumble on me right here.’” This passion for the city was widespread amongst those artists on the Lower East Side. They were not looking to escape the urban environment but rather to welcome it.

The manifestations of this embrace came by way of an equal welcome of those characteristics that sat in oppositional relation to those valorised in the corporate/suburban world. For instance, themes of exhibitions centred on urban ghetto phenomena such as homelessness and prostitution in Colab’s *Times Square Show* and drugs and violent crime in John Morton’s *Murder Suicide Junk* (1980) or even less directly political ones such as Christy Rupp’s *Animals Living in Cities* (1980). Skylines and city buildings also appear frequently, often burning, as in the case of an art installation by Haring depicting money in flames inside the outline of a skyline (n.d.), and an untitled apartment building in flames (n.d.) by David Wojnarowicz. Two projects by artist Richard Hambleton, *Image Mass Murder* from 1977-79 and *Shadows* from 1980-81, highlighted the contrast between urban and suburban living through his haunting human outlines left anonymously on neighbourhood pavements and walls. In the former, viewers would stumble across what appeared to be the police traces of a murder scene. In the latter, the faceless figures seemed to be lurking in the shadows as if ready to perpetrate crimes. In both cases, the experience of coming across such works was one that would have left the viewer feeling vulnerable and unsettled, creating a contrast between a threatening walk on an urban street and that in the safe haven of the suburb.

The differences in value between corporate suburbia and low-income urban areas were not seen only in terms of location and urban planning. The dichotomy between the two was also played out in the art world itself and began with the gentrification of SoHo. Artists looking for cheap rents flocked to the area south of Houston Street during the late 1960s. It was a hotbed of alternative and underground arts, typified by the presence of Fluxus. Like the area of the Lower East Side, development occurred, rents rose, and the previously unnamed area became formally known as ‘SoHo’ for its location south of Houston. As part of that process, the neighbourhood began to reflect the corporate, suburban values that were integral to gentrification. In his study on SoHo, sociologist Charles Simpson (1981) described the artistic community working in SoHo, a community that



developed from conceptualist and minimalist artists who moved in during the late 1960s, as quiet and dedicated, particularly as the artworks produced here appeared to be labour intensive. He outlined the practice of these artists (who included Photorealists by 1981) as involving long but routine hours, where painting was treated much like any other job. He interviewed artists who resented their noisier neighbours like musicians or families with children. The SoHo artist-residents seemed less interested in the urban bustle of Manhattan, opting instead for the routinised lifestyle of most suburbanites. The galleries, too, shifted to cater for chic clientele in their (as Lower East Side artists saw it) cold, white cubes that spoke of calm rationality. The process of exhibition was 'professional', organised and, above all, very, very serious.

The artists who migrated to the Lower East Side were not just unable to penetrate the over-saturated SoHo art scene but were also unwilling. They were certainly against the values of corporate expansion and urban renewal, but they were not simply rebelling against the gentrification process. They resented what they saw as the corporate values imbued in the cold, clinical and 'clean' art produced there, and they turned those values on their head at every opportunity in both their exhibition practices and their works.

## V

This deliberate choice to reject the gentrified values and characteristics of SoHo can be found in several aspects of artists' exhibition practices. First, and most evident, was their choice to use abandoned and neglected sites for both large-scale and small-scale shows. The *Times Square Show* was certainly the most notable given its sizeable participation and press coverage. Another was the previously discussed *Real Estate Show*. In both cases, the reviewers, artists, and organisers all stressed the sites' previous usages. In the case of the former, it was located in the red light Times Square district, with the building's previous incarnation as, amongst other things, a massage parlour. This history and context was reflected in works that examined prostitution and was given significance in reviews of the show. In the case of the latter, works reflected the political nature of the site's dereliction and reviewers and organisers repeatedly mentioned its former uses as both a factory showroom (the purpose for which it was built) and a governmental Model Cities office.

More permanent exhibition spaces were also located in abandoned sites. Co-operatives, particularly those with overt political agendas such as ABC No Rio and Group Material used spaces that had fallen into disrepair. Commercial galleries, at least the early ones, also opened in run-down, sometimes cramped, spaces. The Fun Gallery and Gracie Mansion, two of the first commercial galleries on the Lower East Side, both chose cheap unused storefronts. Another alternative space opened in an empty public school in Queens, P.S. 1, housed the landmark exhibition of the time, *New York/New Wave* (1981). Again, as with the exhibitions, the site was often highlighted as noteworthy in interviews by the co-operative members and gallery owners.



Importantly, these sites were not designed as gallery or exhibition sites. For instance, Gracie Mansion, before opening her storefront, initiated her gallery in the bathroom of her small apartment, aptly named 'The Loo Division'. Nor were they renovated to accommodate 'professional' art world trading practice. They lacked office and storage space and, in the case of the storefronts, could be quite small. The occupants would carry out minimal repairs on the sites, often only enough to have running water and electricity. The peeling paint, and general grungy interiors were left intact with only minor surface enhancements.

In addition to disused sites was an emphasis on public sites in a way that differed from the lofty ideals of a central sculpture intended as enculturation. Graffiti, and its variations, revolved on just such a principle, and its appeal for Lower East Side artists lay in several key traits that coincided with the desire of these artists to escape corporate encroachment. First, graffiti's modern New York manifestation originated in the city itself in the 1960s as a marker in turf wars between gangs. The practice came to the attention of the public in the early 1970s when 'tags' began appearing citywide. Not long after, tags evolved into complex images requiring greater skill. For other downtown artists, its practice leant itself well to their anti-corporate sentiment. The tags and images were an illegal defacement of city property that visibly infuriated the city officials, not least because the anonymity of the spray-painters left them with few people to punish. Added to the appeal was graffiti's ability to have an aggressive, invasive and yet, anonymous presence in a crowded urban area.<sup>18</sup> The act represented an attack on the establishment.

Notably, graffiti as an art form had been rejected by SoHo itself in the early 1970s. Graffiti has been traditionally viewed as an overnight phenomenon in the art world, much like the downtown arts scene itself. However, critics and artists had acknowledged it as an art form several years before it's heyday in the early 1980s but had not taken root. As early as 1973, its stylistic traits were critically evaluated in *New York Magazine* (Castleman 1982:141-142) and by 1975, it knocked at the art world gates when a large scale exhibition devoted solely to graffiti, including a catalogue and accompanying critical essay, took place at Artists Space. But SoHo was not interested, and graffiti stayed in the background. Graffiti as an art form, then, primarily held appeal for those positioning themselves against SoHo.

One particularly appealing aspect of graffiti practice was its emphasis on the nature of art as fleeting interventions in people's everyday lives, not as precious objects around which people should gravitate. Keith Haring's chalk drawings, for instance, were displayed on the blank

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<sup>18</sup> This does mean that graffitists wanted to remain anonymous. Whilst it is true that some were persuaded by unscrupulous dealers and collectors to 'come out', it appears that individualist ego also was a factor, even before the interference of the art world. In a 1971 New York Times report on graffiti in the subways, the now famous graffiti-ist 'Taki 183' admitted "I don't feel like a celebrity normally...[b]ut the guys make me feel like one when they introduce me to someone. 'This is him,' they say. The guy knows who the first one was." (Article reproduced in Cooper and Chalfant 1984:14).



advertising space in New York's subway stations. (Fig. 7) As opposed to a square or a park with benches, the subway is a place of transience, with people spending only a few minutes in one place. They would only pass these works on their way elsewhere. Equally, Hambleton's outlined figures on pavements and walls would be noticed only as someone was walking down the street. They were not located in places designed for pedestrians to stop and rest but rather were found en route. The ultimate embodiments of such practices, was, undoubtedly, graffiti itself. The images emblazoned on the subway cars were always on the move, allowing the viewer only a brief glimpse as they passed by.

Other works and projects that also maintained the aim of 'ground-level' exhibition/intervention used flyers and posters in public places like building walls, fences or telephone booths as in the case of Holzer's work. This practice was not only used for projects with a directly political theme. Her other more effusive work, like her poster of truisms entitled *Abuse of power* (1979) in Fig.8, were small, un-monumental works which drew in the passer-by. Coming across these impermanent works was accidental rather than intentional. Another project, also involving the subway, the ultimate sign of transience, was Group Material's "subculture" in 1983. Here, artists designed subway poster's that took the shape and, sometimes, look of the adverts that lined the insides of subway cars. The group purchased the space and placed their artists' posters, which were a disparate collection of themes, images and styles. In this case, the viewer was stationary whilst in transience, but like the other works, the site of viewing was not the object of intentional pilgrimage.

Other uses of public space were more centralised sites for art viewing but equally avoided the space of quiet contemplation offered by SoHo's galleries. Many artists, both known and unknown, showed and performed work in the smoky, noisy, chaotic environments of the various nightclubs. Places like Club 57, run part-time in the basement of a Polish community church, and the Mudd club, offered a wide range of projects, from graffiti murals to installations to performances to painting shows. Work was sometimes damaged or stolen whilst people danced around objects with drinks and cigarettes in hand. Interactive works, such as Ronny Cutrone's cage piece entitled *Homosapiens* built for Mudd, became an integral part in the club experience without that experience taking a back seat to the art. The setting meant that these objects or even performances were not viewed as 'precious'.

This emphasis on the site itself, in all of these examples, indicates the conscious choice over the place of exhibition. None of these were pristine environments, showcasing work in a protective shell. Tellingly, Bobby G described the thinking behind ABC No Rio's own site, saying, "This is a place, not a space". (Goldstein 1985:64) Whilst a 'space' conjured up the image of an area apart from its environment, a cocoon intended to foster an exclusive relationship between art and its viewer, a 'place' invoked the idea of an inclusive environment in which the art was just one



element. Such a distinction is a key thought behind those artists rebelling against SoHo's white cubes since they were not looking for an alternate gallery but alternative sites embodying different values and characteristics.

Along with the sites, the shows made a conscious decision to veer away from the display aesthetic of those white cube sites, particularly in terms of their production values and 'professionalism'. Aside from the general state of disrepair of the sites themselves, many of the shows like the *Times Square Show* and *New York/New Wave* had packed walls with little space between or order to the works. The works themselves were often tacked up, clumsily shoved into corners or hung from pipes with string. Performance shows, like "New Wave Vaudeville" held at Irving Plaza in 1978, were more akin to amateur community talent nights than cultured performances with notably shoddy sound systems and lighting. Performance artist John Sex, for instance, recalled that his shows at Club 57 held in 1981 were mounted on a budget of under fifty dollars. (Frank and McKenzie 1987:81) In addition, the co-ordination of performances lacked any polished finesse as can be witnessed in the chaotic episodes of Glenn O'Brien's cable television programme, *TV Party*, featuring artists and performers simply 'mucking about' in front of the camera.<sup>19</sup> These works and performances adopted and endorsed low production values.

This deliberate amateurism was not manifested solely in the aesthetic but in the organisation as well. Few of these shows had any institutional structure or hierarchy as would be found at more established commercial galleries whereby the gallery owner/dealer would develop a small stable of key artists whose solo exhibitions took precedence over unknown artists. A characteristic of most co-operatives was their refusal to exclude artists or viewpoints. An ABC No Rio member explained that "I can't exactly say what art is. I'm not going to make a judgement. That's why I don't mind seeing artwork up there that I don't necessarily agree with politically or otherwise." (Leavitt 1985:68) Shows, too, put on by ABC No Rio or Colab were done either by committee as in the case of *Real Estate Show* and *Time Square Show*, or by allowing each member to put on a show of their own but which were most often group in nature. But it was not only the co-operatives that steered away from professional gallery organisation. Some commercial galleries, particularly those who opened early on during the development of the East Village scene, operated their exhibition schedule based around their friends regardless of their moneymaking potential or of their envisioned artistic skill. Irving Sandler (1984:17) interpreted choices made by dealers to run galleries commercially rather than on public funds not to make money but so that they would be "free to show their friends *only*." The implication is that they actually had little interest in building a professional gallery within the art world system. Commercial clubs showcasing art took a similarly amateur approach. Mudd's performance programme had a decidedly open slant to it. "Musicians of all kinds shared the stage with performance artists, avant-garde cabaret performers, and whoever

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<sup>19</sup> Full episodes from the series that ran over four years are difficult to find, but a compilation video of show highlights is available. See O'Brien, n.d.



else concocted a presentation. Corny, elaborately skewed variety shows become frequent....” (Frank and McKenzie 1987:64-5) Their programme choices, then, did not demonstrate the ‘professional’ attitude of chic SoHo galleries appealing to the urban corporate crowd with slickly mounted exhibitions. Instead the shows of downtown artists were openly amateur and even deliberately shoddy in their production. And rather than calm, contemplative spaces with concentration on one artist or even one work, the desired effect was a chaotic, free-for-all in which artistic reputation based on skill meant little.

Importantly, the underlying association between the *values* underpinning the locational environment of exhibition and the work shown within that environment was apparent. The work shown in (gentrified) SoHo was seen as reflecting the area’s corporate values that underlay the gentrified version of SoHo. Deutsche and Ryan (1987:166), although disagreeing with the characterisation, highlighted the feeling by the artists that those movements were cold and rational as was expressed in an exhibition by the Whitney Museum in 1983, characteristics linked to the corporatised SoHo environment. Although the sites and production of exhibition, be it for objects or performance, can be more directly contrasted to the gentrified sites of SoHo, much of the downtown arts scene work took on similar qualities – impermanence, chaos and amateur-ness – that characterised their environments. For instance, the materials used made a direct statement about the objects valorised by the established avant-garde in SoHo. Although Minimalists, for instance, used industrial materials, the objects themselves possessed a permanence that East Village artists often deliberately avoided. Photocopies and leaflets were not simply used as advertising for shows but became the work itself as in the case of Holzer’s posters. Haring used chalk for his subway work, a substance that was easily removable. Fekner, Hambleton, Wojnarowicz and Scot Borofsky (Fig. 9) worked on building surfaces that were sure to be knocked down, painted over or would deteriorate.

These materials and surfaces also embodied low production values. They were cheap, accessible and used with little modification. In other words, they were not industrially fabricated according to artistic specification. Found rubbish was a preferred material either as the substance of the work as in artist Bobby G’s 1980 work, *Dead Packs*, a pile of found cigarette packages with accompanying text, or as the foundation for a work, as in Wojnarowicz’s rubbish bin lid. (Fig. 10) Other forms of “urban salvage” included discarded windows, vinyl albums, bits of plastic and metal signs. (Robinson and McCormick 1984:139) In all of these cases, the works always teetered on the edge of impermanence using materials that were not durable or were consigned to disappear with the cycle of disposable consumer items.

The formal elements of the works also expressed a similar antipathy to SoHo work. A number of artists including Cutrone, Scharf, and Basquiat, amongst many others, packed surfaces with bright, sometimes garish, colours creating chaotic and highly charged visual experiences for



the viewer. Rhonda Zwillinger, in a 1985 installation piece, overwhelms the space with texture and bright colours leaving no surface untouched, tellingly entitling it *Post Minimal Glitz*. (Fig. 11) Some work, like that of Haring or Borofsky, used basic outlines or crude representations rather than detailed and skilled drawing techniques in figurative representation displaying an amateurism that was in direct contrast to Photorealist works. Furthermore, the imagery itself, such as the cartoon images of Scharf and Cutrone, was infantile and yet could refer obliquely to dominant corporate presence. Reminiscent of Howland's octopus motif, Scharf's *Controlopuss* (1983-84) (Fig. 12) depicts a childish make-believe creature with bulging eyes and bright smiles. Its curling tentacles and innocent expressions, though, take on a menacing edge in their garish colours and in relation to its sinister title. These highly emotive works steered clear of the perceived cool, reflective tone of work found in SoHo galleries.

It may be argued that these characteristics of downtown art were simply a reaction against the *styles* of art found in SoHo and is thus an intertextual phenomenon with little connection to any corporate values. However, a direct connection between this clash of values and the lack of direct collection of downtown work by corporations can be found in a statement made by a corporate collector. She expressed the dislike of the work because "[t]hey are too weird and unbelievable." (cited in Martorella, 1990:101) Indeed, Martorella explained that, "The social implications of works that expressed violence, commercial vulgarity, or stupid, irrational, and spontaneous impulses embodied a general subject matter with which the modern corporation, based on rational bureaucratic principles, could not identify" (99). One need only look to any of the downtown art examples so far provided, including both objects and performance, to recognise the existence of a direct conflict of values.

## VI

If downtown art, then, can be seen on so many levels to react to the encroachment of corporate values through the gentrification of artistic neighbourhoods, such as SoHo, then one wonders how Deutsche and Ryan, so ruthless in their critique of artists in the gentrification of the East Village, could miss such a connection. Were they completely in the dark? An explanation, I believe, can be found in the historical timing of their article in the context of developments on the Lower East Side.

The downtown arts scene changed considerably after approximately 1981. Artists active in this area had been showing from at least 1975 when Edit deAk produced the show *Person into Persona* at Artists Space. From that point, there was a considerable amount of organised artistic activity in the area. Nonetheless, the first commercial gallery did not open on the Lower East Side until late 1981, and, even by the admission of Deutsche and Ryan, large numbers of commercial galleries did not begin to appear until late 1982 and into 1983. Robinson and McCormick



(1984:141) have cited the summer of 1983, when the East Village galleries stayed open while other art districts closed, as the point at which the area gained international recognition by the art establishment, and the East Village became the site of high-profile art world activity. The interconnected communities of artists in downtown New York and the South Bronx were no longer an undefined cluster of alternative art activity but were instead a major art world development.

There was also an expansion in political activity by art groups addressing gentrification and community needs that roughly paralleled this expansion of the commercial art world in the area. Although co-operative galleries existed well before 1980, and political concerns had been voiced, it is after 1980 that an organised, political role became prevalent amongst artists in the area. After this point, a number of groups like ABC No Rio, Group Material and even Fashion/Moda who had community-oriented agendas, began to address the political issues of gentrification and low-income residents in relation to art. Even PAD/D became active in sponsorship of activity after that point even though it had formed as a discussion group in 1977. All of these groups continued to be active and vocal through the 1980s. It would appear, then, that anxiety over corporate spread took hold in the area as the 1980s began. Deutsche and Ryan's article that appeared in a 1984 edition of *October* can be understood, at least in part, as a manifestation of this anxiety.

This unease was not misplaced. Certainly the media coverage, although sought after by many artists for reasons more to do with their use of entertainment practices, as we will see in chapter 4, also encouraged the infiltration of mainstream art world practices and players. For instance, Mary Boone, although hailed as the new type of dealer operating as a high-flying executive, still did so within the standard art world structures that had previously shaped the artist/dealer/collector relationship. This combination of corporate and art world roles proved to be a deadly combination for the life of the downtown artistic network. For the community had literally been formed by its flight from the chic, exclusive world that SoHo had become, this spelled disaster. Sure enough, by 1986, critics were asking if the East Village Scene was over. (Tully 1986) Even Basquiat who had once expressed his love of New York's city streets was looking for an escape. Vincent Gallo recalled him saying, "Man, I hate New York. It sucks. I gotta get out of the city. New York's changed. I hate it here." (cited in Hoban 1990:313)

This suggestion sharply contrasts to many critical depictions of the downtown arts scene in relation to the issue of gentrification. These artists did not embrace corporate expansion and its involvement in the arts, be it through collecting, sponsorship, or integration into artistic neighbourhoods. Rather, it was precisely this expansion through gentrification of the Lower East Side that killed the scene since the maintenance of their anti-corporate/anti-suburban attitudes in a gentrified area was impossible. As artist David Wojnarowicz explained, "The energy I felt here in the beginning is dissipating....The mix of people, even the violent edge to some areas of town, was the



stuff I was working with. Wall-to-wall sushi joints just aren't inspiring at all." (cited in Frank and McKenzie 1987:146)

I am not claiming that there were no capitalist operations stemming from service sector expansion in the work or practice of these artists. As I will demonstrate in the next two chapters, both entrepreneurialism and the growing alternative entertainment sector were extremely influential in shaping the scene and left a more enduring legacy for future artists and the structure of the art world. However, as has been shown, corporate sponsorship was not among the most relevant systemic influences upon the downtown arts scene in the period under examination. While service sector corporations diversified their activities into the art world, and can be understood as representing an instance of the situational logic of opportunism on the part of corporate players, the role that such diversification played did not immediately enable downtown artists. Gentrification, meanwhile, has been rightfully considered an important systemic influence. However, the traditional accounts tend to misrepresent its structural and ideational dynamic. Rather than embracing gentrification and the corporate values it represented, downtown artists defined themselves against this development that they perceived to marry the arts with a corporate vision. The effect of gentrification, at least in the formation of the downtown arts scene, provoked a *negative* reaction, manifesting all of the hallmarks of the situational logic of elimination. Tensions between corporate interests and artists took two forms. Some artists were overtly opposed to gentrification since it threatened to dismantle the existing neighbourhood infrastructure upon which they (and local residents) were dependent. Others rejected the values that were connected with the corporate ideology driving the gentrification project. Although not all of the artists assumed a coherent stance against the ramifications of the project, the aggregate effect of their actions did not enable the encroachment of corporate interests in their community and culture.



## Chapter 3

### Production and Distribution I: Horatio Alger in Downtown New York

*I guess the evolution from about '75 though '80 for me went from being an artist who really couldn't get many chances because of the market situation and the art gallery scene into having to produce a market, you know, becoming a kind of entrepreneur. But it wasn't just like me or you, it was everybody making their own records, their own magazines and we all became entrepreneurs in our own way....*

Diego Cortez<sup>1</sup>

Jostling for the position of most controversial aspect of downtown art practice, along with the question of gentrification as discussed in chapter 2, was entrepreneurialism, which, as we will see, encompassed a direct involvement of artists in the sales and promotion of their work. Entrepreneurial activity amongst artists was not new. As art historians Bättschmann (1997), Fitzgerald (1995), Gee (1981) and Naifeh (1976) have been at pains to reveal, artists of different periods have engaged in varying aspects of their own promotion and sales, taking up those roles when conventional avenues were either not available to artists or not satisfactory for their wants and needs. However, the debate by critics of the time made the entrepreneurial activity of the downtown artists sound like a shockingly new phenomenon.

There is no doubt that such activity by these artists was open and recognised by all those commenting upon the scene itself, particularly after the election of Ronald Reagan. Supporters of these artists tended to view entrepreneurial activity as a new and exciting alternative to the established art world for young artists in New York. Even Robinson and McCormick's laughing reference to the parallels between East Village activity and "the Reaganite zeitgeist" conveyed a sense of adventure. (1984:135,137) In the same issue of *Art in America*, detractors, on the other hand, argued that this entrepreneurial activity was calculated and motivated by greed, viewing those same parallels not as a coincidence but as a sombre manifestation of the broader economic and political turn to the right. Owens (1984:163) responded to Robinson and lamented that "what has been constructed in the East Village is not an alternative to, but a miniature replica of the contemporary art market – a kind of Junior Achievement for young culture-industrialists." He also concluded that "[t]he East Village is not only a local phenomenon, but also a global symptom." Here we can see a definite equation between these artists and the encroachment of 'late capitalism', more specifically, a concern over the apparent penetration of commodification into new areas.

This debate was not confined to a few pages in a single issue of *Art in America*. Both supporters and detractors felt it necessary to engage with the issues surrounding this entrepreneurial activity and to explain how and why it took hold amongst New York's downtown



artists. Some attributed it to a resurgence of Warholian influence; some attributed it to the conscious pursuit of wealth; some attributed it to the structures of late capitalism. An important feature in all of these explanations was the implicit understanding of structure and agency in the creation of New York's downtown artistic entrepreneurial practice. As in the case of the arguments presented in chapter 1, most of these more focused investigations were inadequate. They either ignored the structural circumstances within which the artists were working, or else they placed their activity within such dominant and broad structures that all 'choices' made by the artists were mere manifestations of global forces and historical trajectories.<sup>2</sup> As may be expected, such one-sided approaches led to rather simplistic accounts of the functioning and significance of such activity. Supporters such as Robinson and McCormick tended to gloss over the ramifications of such activity for artists and the art world in general. They localised such activity to individuals within the 'scene' without providing a deeper analysis into its wider social context. Detractors on the other hand, often placed such activity within such a vast framework of structures that their proximate significance – in other words, for the art world – was lost within an entire global network painted with the same brush.

In order to understand the relationship between the downtown artists and their engagement in entrepreneurialism, we must examine the proximate context of such activity. In this chapter, I will conduct a morphogenetic analysis of the systemic influences that shaped the working environment for young New York artists looking to forge a career in the late 1970s and early 80s. As we will see, these systemic influences were the structural and ideational diversifications of artistic activity as the result of artists adopting entrepreneurial practices, fostering a situational logic of opportunism. Key choices made by artists shall illustrate such a situational logic. Significantly, important changes in the relationship between artists and traditional art world production, distribution and exhibition practices will become apparent. Whilst artists shifted their practice toward the commercial aspects of art production, they also gained significant control over that production and the dissemination of their works.

## I

A key change in the U.S. economy that affected the arts fundamentally was the overall rise in entrepreneurial activity. Of course, entrepreneurialism was not new in American economic history. Despite the dominance of corporate empires in the American economy since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, much of mythic America was built on its history of small businesses and individuals struggling to forge a place for themselves in the 'newly' formed society. The surge of entrepreneurialism so visible in 1980s America, particularly after 1983, has been attributed to "the new mood of optimism unleashed by the Reagan boom." (Berman 1994:105) The pro-business

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Cortez and deAk (1985).



mandate of this president was seen to put free-market, entrepreneurial ideology at the forefront of his agenda, thus opening up the floor to small business through tax cuts and deregulation. Certainly, 'Reaganomics', as his economic strategies came to be known, played a large part in fuelling the entrepreneurial fire. But the scale, and even the policies themselves, of Reagan's economic agenda were made possible through the climate in which they were conceived. Like Barry Goldwater, the failed Republican candidate of 1964, Ronald Reagan was a champion of the 'pioneering spirit' of small and independent business, not multinational corporations. Although Goldwater sewed the seeds of neo-conservatism, Reagan's views, unlike Goldwater's in 1964, were not marginal but approved by the voting public on a massive scale, suggesting that the economic and political climate in which his stance was received had changed significantly. Crucial to these political developments, as will be examined, was the shift from industrialism to a service economy and the concurrent rise of small business entrepreneurialism during the 1970s.

Many of the contemporary artists who came to the forefront of media attention during the 1980s were viewed as opportunists, riding the crest of the 'Reagan revolution' wave, if not actual Reaganites themselves. But as with the shifts in the U.S. economy, changes in the art world were happening several years before Reagan's policies came into effect, particularly with regard to the role of artists in the production and sale of their works. This section will outline the structural changes taking place within the United States that led to an increase in entrepreneurial activity, how the artists in New York at the time opportunistically exploited these developments, and how they altered their practice and place in the art world.

Historical events show that entrepreneurial growth was making a highly visible and deeply felt impact at this particular juncture in American economic history. The 1970s saw not only the resurgence of corporate coalitions but also exponential growth in the membership of small business lobby groups such as the United States Chamber of Commerce (USCC) and the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB). Conservative think tanks also grew in importance, and significantly, the Heritage Foundation, speaking for the Sun-belt entrepreneurs rather than "Fortune 500 firms", was founded in 1973. Whereas the voice of small business had been sidelined in Washington (at least since 1945), active participation in lobby organisations and vocal think tanks stimulated by the growth in entrepreneurial activity, meant that the fiercely anti-regulation and anti-tax agendas of these groups moved onto the priority list of politicians who found themselves the focus of highly organised pressure campaigns. (McQuaid 1994:154) It is unsurprising, then, to find that a political candidate representing the entrepreneurial spirit, namely Ronald Reagan, whose business support bases were "small, not large; low tech, not high tech; and domestic, not multinational," (165) should gain so much support, particularly and most notably at the expense of a big money/big business candidate – Texas Republican, John Connally. As historian Kim McQuaid

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<sup>2</sup> On a methodological note, few of the latter writers absolved the artists of *responsibility* for the participation in entrepreneurial activity.



has described of the era, “High-roller entrepreneurs and innovative small business people not tied to the habits of mind (or collective bargaining contracts) of the past assumed mythic status, particularly within the new Reagan administration.” (182)

Reagan’s administration politically cemented much of this entrepreneurial momentum throughout the 1980s. Many of the benefits for small business and entrepreneurs were felt through tax cuts. For instance, because small businesses were taxed under the personal tax laws and not those of corporate taxation, the lowering of the top marginal rate of tax increased the margin of net profit for many small firms. By 1986, those same small business lobbies that consolidated power in the 1970s helped to shift the benefits of lower tax rates (initially instituted in 1982) away from large, capital-intensive corporations onto themselves.

What is important to note here, though, is that the increased entrepreneurial activity was driven by more than just Republican Reaganites, small business lobby groups and conservative think tanks. Indeed, the pressure from the rapid growth of such activity had the public and politicians alike, including Democrats, focusing on small business in a way that was unheard of just 20 years earlier. The reason for this was structural change occurring in both economic and demographic realms, particularly with the rise of the service sector. Studies on entrepreneurialism (Dennis 1993:124-125; Peterson and Berger 1971) have emphasised “economic turbulence” as a significant condition contributing to new, small business formation. Dennis points to a number of specific factors that contributed to the instability in the mid-1970s: inflation, the oil crisis of 1973 and the increasing international competition it signified, and, most notably, the rapid decline of manufacturing along side growth in tertiary industries. An environment of swift sector change, particularly highlighted in the latter factor, was a key element, according to Dennis, for increased entrepreneurial activity. Large firms have prospered in stable environments whereby change can be absorbed and effected slowly and incrementally, thus accommodating larger and more complex internal structures. Small business, unencumbered with large bureaucratic structures, could adapt to change more easily and at an increased pace. Furthermore, the speed with which the service industry grew was greatly aided by the fact that it was not a physical capital-intensive sector unlike manufacturing. The benefits of this were two-fold. First, without the need for machinery and other cumbersome physical capital, business in the service sector allowed people to be far more flexible in their location. They could easily locate (and relocate) to suit their market.<sup>3</sup> Second, the initial outlay for starting a service sector business was lower, and thus allowed an increased number of people entry into the sector.

In addition, changes in the labour force ensured that those opportunities afforded by sector growth would be seized. Due to the baby boom that followed the end of the Second World War, the

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, service-based industries often need to be located in populated areas so that the service they provide is accessible to their market, particularly if their service was not (traditionally) product-based.



sheer number of those of working age increased. The size of the labour force was also expanded by the large-scale entry of women into full or part-time employment. As Dennis (123) highlighted, existing corporations offered only limited employment opportunities and could not absorb all those looking for work.

Both the baby boom and the rise in the number of working women also held their own particular characteristics that would further influence members of this large work force to enter entrepreneurial employment. Dennis (122) has called attention to studies that have shown that roughly two out of every three new businesses were formed by people between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-nine. The first baby boomers reached this age at the beginning of the '70s, while the last group tailed off during the mid to late '80s, making them likely entrepreneurs of the period. And, from studies conducted on the make-up of the entrepreneurial business sector, Dennis has suggested that women were more likely to form their own business than men. Thus, women entering the work force in far greater numbers precisely at a time when the labour force was swollen through population increase extended the likelihood that those seeking employment would do so outside of the limits of established corporations. In addition, the growth in the number of working women increased the numbers of two-income households. This allowed one member to take greater risks by starting their own business since the other member often possesses a steady and reliable income. These structural elements, both economic and demographic, Dennis suggested, were key contributing factors to the rise and decline of entrepreneurial activity of the 1970s and '80s in the United States.

## II

Our group of artists, looking to establish careers, found their environment being shaped by such changes, even before the appearance of the Reagan administration. As with the labour market in general, the numbers of artists had been on the increase for several decades, in large part due to the broadening access of post-secondary education coupled with the increased academicisation of visual arts programmes. These two factors made a career in the arts more accessible as well as more acceptable. (Singerman 1999) As visual arts programmes produced more graduates, the demographics of the artist community changed in the sheer number of people who, after graduation, classified themselves as artists. Sharon Zukin (1982:437), for instance, cited estimates of artist numbers in New York in the early 1960s that ranged from 1000 to 35,000, with those numbers escalating to 100,000 by the time of the 1970 New York census. Defining a 'working' artist as those who produce and exhibit work (although not necessarily resulting in sales), Diana Crane (1987:4), cited a national increase from 600,000 to 1 million in the ten year span of 1970 to 1980.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> These statistics were taken from the Bureau of the Census. She purposely excluded 'sales' from the definition of a working artist because many who call themselves artists could not support themselves from the production of their work, even if they participated in the exhibition process. However, the exhibition of work with the intention of sales (assuming



Public funding was a limited option since neither the relatively new National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) nor the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) (the model and test pilot for NEA), provided much financial aid to these as yet unknown individuals. Some artists formed declared non-profit groups, such as Collaborative Projects, with the specific aim of securing grant funds from these state-administered organisations. But, as many have argued, public expenditure on the arts was (and still is) comparatively small when assessed in terms of government spending overall. Cultural economist Tyler Cowen (1998:203) has pointed out that “the NEA has never spent more than seventy cents per head of the American population....The American government spends more on military marching bands than on the NEA.”

In addition, the majority of money that did come from public sources like the NEA and NYSCA went to museums. Of the NEA's money apportioned for the visual arts in the early 70s, Crane (1987:6,n10) recorded that 76 percent went to museums alone, with the other 24 percent divided amongst “art exhibitions, art and cultural centers, and art funds or councils.” An even higher proportion from the NYSCA, 81 percent, went to museums. Potentially, one could claim that individual artists felt an indirect effect through the museum activity that was stimulated by these public funds. But these already small amounts were further reduced by the broad range of museums covered under this category of public funding. Not only did visual arts museums have to compete with one another for funding, they also had to compete with other types of museums such as history and military. Little public money was left over for individual artists, particularly those who were unknown quantities in the art/academic world.

Scarcity was not only a feature of the public funding route. Commercially speaking, many new artists of the time felt that the doors to SoHo, the centre of contemporary art in the 1960s and 70s, were shut, leaving little opportunity within the private sector of the art world. Part of this perception was attributable to the belief that SoHo was dominated by a handful of what had become established styles, namely Minimalism and Conceptualism. If new artists did not fit into those moulds, it was unlikely they would receive much attention from dealers. But a real shortage of dealers and galleries existed for the growing artist labour force. Dealers were swamped by artists' slides and solicitations. Ivan Karp, the dealer of the SoHo gallery, O.K. Harris, explained that his gallery went from seeing twenty or thirty sets of artists' slides a week in the 1960s, to roughly one hundred a week, or five thousand a year, in 1979, and could not see soliciting artists personally due to the overwhelming numbers.<sup>5</sup> (Diamondstein 1979:193-194) One resolution to this problem would have been mass migrations of artists into other professions accompanied by a decline in visual arts production. What happened instead was that artists, wanting to remain as such, diversified into

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the candidate has labelled themselves as an artist), constituted the active pursuit of an artistic career. See note 6 of her 'Introduction' for this definition.



another route – the entrepreneurial one. Just like many others looking for work in the age of declining industry and a growing labour force, they chose to seize upon the options afforded them by the rapid growth of the service sector.

There was little reason for the artists to change professions. As a business option, the art world, despite seeming closed, provided several key ingredients for success in the overall economic climate. First, the art world was not a large institution housing a complicated bureaucracy. Rather, it was made up of a set of small businesses and individuals who loosely followed a set of production, display and sales conventions. Regulation mainly came from the state with few rigid, internally imposed rules. Even contracts between parties were only erratically concretised in writing, particularly as secrecy often took precedence over transparency for both dealers and patrons. My aim here is not to say that the art world has no conventions but rather that they are not rigid nor are they consistent. One need only look at the history of artists' exhibition practices (Bätschmann 1997), accounts of art markets in different countries and periods (North 1996), or even the Western art market of the past century (Watson 1992) to see that the 'art world' has hardly adopted a steady and easily definable set of practices. So, despite its centuries-old activity, the art world consistently shifted and adapted its loose set of structures to suit the circumstances in which it found itself operating. The art world of the 1970s was no exception and thus had the capacity to change in a volatile economy.

Second, the cost of entry into and participation in the art world was low since little physical capital was needed. Of course, this had been the case for previous decades and so was not a new economic condition for would be artists. Art of the Sixties and Seventies was, it was true, turning to more expensive materials such as video equipment, possible only through institutional sponsorship, particularly the university. (Singerman 1999:157-162) However, choice of materials, especially for experimental art, was flexible. Many artists turned to cheap materials for their works, focusing particularly on the possibilities in relatively new material developments such as photocopies, spray paint and cable. For those who opted for more expensive media, such as the New Cinema filmmakers, co-operative ownership of limited equipment made production considerably cheaper.

Materials themselves, however important to the constitution of the actual artworks, did not guarantee the establishment of a career in the arts. Even conceptual artists using no concrete materials needed outlets for their work, to generate interest and income, in order to function as professional artists. In the past, established dealers often provided both collectors and critics for new work through their own personal connections. More recently, academic institutions have assumed art world roles for artists by providing a body of critics and historians as well as a support structure within its institutional framework through the operation of gallery spaces and visiting artist

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<sup>5</sup> Critics also found themselves inundated by requests to review shows. Glueck estimated that in 1982, she reviewed approximately 50 shows each week whilst "a thousand others [did] not [have] a prayer of getting into the paper."



programmes. The downtown artists, however, had developed largely outside of academia and did not appeal to established dealers. But they were not at a loss for options since both the loose structures of the art world and the low cost of entry into the visual arts facilitated developments of outlets necessary for the pursuit of a career in the visual arts. As we will now see, those looking to establish such a career in downtown New York diversified the activities of four key areas of artistic production – exhibition, sales, promotion and criticism.

### III

The most basic and obvious need, in terms of exhibition, was space. Running a set space was one option. The main expense of taking on exhibition spaces was the monthly rent of the building or storefront. As was immediately recognised, this cost could be drastically reduced depending on its location, and with a history of artistic centres developing in low income areas along with the particular focus on the aesthetic of urban decay, exhibition spaces immediately sprang up in and around the Lower East Side. One group of exhibition spaces to make an appearance were the low-cost commercial spaces. These were rented spaces that acted in the first instance as galleries for the exhibition and sale of works of art. The Fun Gallery, for example, was initiated in a Lower East Side storefront by Patti Astor and Bill Stelling on a five hundred dollar tax return. (Hoban 1998:157) Co-operatives such as Group Material (at least initially) and ABC No Rio Dinero also relied on disused spaces in order to exist. Developed areas in Manhattan would have been unaffordable to those reliant on grants and other public funding. Another option was to rent a space within an already functioning building. Sur Rodney Sur, later a partner in Gracie Mansion's gallery, initially ran a gallery in a space rented from an animal hospital. This option of running a gallery inside an already operational site would have reduced costs in terms of bills, maintenance and rent. Or, one needed not rent specific gallery spaces at all. Gracie Mansion and Tony Shafrazi each ran their first galleries out of their apartments. As the owners of their own business, they could amalgamate their costs of living and work into one, thus reducing the expense required to run the business. Another way of spreading direct costs of exhibiting work was to incorporate exhibitions into another, more commercially viable business. Ann Magnuson, Steve Mass, and the Goode brothers all exhibited work in clubs under their management as part of their wider arts programmes. Not only did this mean that they did not carry a separate rental cost for the exhibition, but because their clubs were, at least for a time, commercially viable projects, they did not require the *sale* of art works to cover the exhibition costs. Rather, the club owners and managers required interest from patrons, with profits being derived from entrance fees and alcohol consumption, something that could have been done without artists' exhibitions.

The possibility of curating and/or producing independent exhibitions not tied to a gallery space also became feasible due to the low cost of entry into exhibition production. Independent

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(ARTnews 1982:60)



exhibitions were free from the obligations of the monthly rental costs and bills tied to running a gallery and thus provided both groups and individuals the means to produce their own shows. The artist co-operative, Collaborative Projects (Colab), was able to mount the hugely successful month-long *Times Square Show* in a disused former bus depot/massage parlour. The overhead costs for producing such an exhibition were small, given that repairs to make these types of spaces minimally functional were often carried out by the artists themselves and rent was paid as a one-off fee. As with the longer-term gallery spaces, personal living quarters provided cheap options for independent exhibitions. Precedents had been set by co-operative galleries such as Artists Space, which was able to fund many independent shows without committing to long-term costs by encouraging artists to mount them in loft spaces. (Moore and Miller 1985:3) And, as Zukin (1989) has highlighted, lofts became a centre of art exhibition throughout the Sixties and Seventies. However, lofts had always been a part of art production. Downtown artists of the late 1970s turned their often small and cramped apartments that were not like the large-scale loft/studio spaces, into exhibition facilities, as did David McDermott when he produced a solo exhibition for the artist, Duncan Hannah. (Fig. 13) Clubs also offered the opportunity for groups and individuals to put shows together. Keith Haring, for instance, curated several exhibitions for the Mudd Club in the early 1980s.

In addition, exhibition practices of downtown artists benefited from the lack of rigid institutional boundaries in the art world. As Archer (1995:219-221) has shown, highly integrated institutions tend to be more resistant to change as a result of the situational logic of protectionism that derives from the vested interest in maintaining existing institutional boundaries. For example, unlike the role of a doctor, which is heavily regulated and restricted to a defined set of practices with access to material resources limited by direct integration in the institutional system, art world participants can move easily from one role to another with comparably few restrictions. In the case at hand, many artists were actively involved in the organising, hanging and promotion of shows, with the 'curators' acting as little more than producers who supplied a venue and dates, as was the case with the *Times Square Show*. Artists themselves acted in the capacity of curator, as did Haring, whose place within the wider community of artists facilitated the enthusiasm of fellow artists to participate. In both of these instances, costs that were usually involved in the co-ordination of shows – hanging, lighting, promotion, monitoring of the space, possible stipends – were often bypassed through the participation of enthusiastic networks of friends.

Exhibitions were not the only area in which one could find flourishing entrepreneurialism. An important aspect of this activity was the effort to access other avenues for artists' products and creative efforts. The most basic form of this activity can be identified in the different sales techniques applied by artists' and, less so, galleries. 'Hawking' is the simplest form of entrepreneurial sales identifiable in the artists' sales practice and differed from the historically noted cases of the bartering of artworks for goods or services by artists such as Jackson Pollock. (Naifeh



and Smith 1992:557,626) In some instances, downtown artists opted to incorporate street peddling in a variety of contexts. Basquiat hawked hand-painted postcards and t-shirts to passers-by outside museums and galleries. Described as “an itinerant commercial photographer”, Tom Warren set up his “portable studio” to photograph people on the street, selling the prints to the subjects for one dollar each. (Robinson and McCormick 1984:159) Organised events, such as political demonstrations or exhibition openings, also provided arenas in which to flog art works, as was the case with Haring who sold and gave away hand-drawn buttons, t-shirts and hats. In all of these cases, hawking functioned as a basic method of distributing one’s artwork requiring little capital rather than an exchange for necessary goods and services in the bartering process.

Likewise, artists and some galleries also used these direct sales techniques in the more conventional and structured form of stores that offered the sale of cheap, artist-produced products for a range of prices to the broader public than the narrow band of collectors. Some artists, such as Haring with The Pop Shop and Mark Kostabi with Kostabi World (Fig. 14), opened their own shops selling their own products exclusively. Gallery owners also opened stores offering artists’ products such as Gracie Mansion who opened the Gracie Mansion Gallery Store. Other similar outlets, like 5 & Dime and Civilization opened offering an array of “quirky” and “crafts-oriented” artists’ works. (Frank and McKenzie 1987:144) In all of the instances listed above, income from sales was handled by the owner of the venue. Importantly, though, this was not always the case. Colab’s A. More Store (Fig. 15) acted as a conduit venue for artists wishing to sell items (the store focused on multiples) as did the “sales desk-cum-souvenir shop” set up at the entrance to the *Times Square Show* proffering “[p]hotocopied images, kitschy fetishes, original sculptures bagged like dime-store favors, artists’ books produced in limited runs of one hundred or two, ill-fitting masks and items of adornment, privately produced cassettes of aspiring Punk bands, posters, badges, T-shirts, and who knows what else were available for – well, what they looked like they ought to cost.” (Frank and McKenzie 1987:28,30) Colab also published a catalogue through which artists could sell their (again, multiple) works as an alternative to the storefront option. In these instances, the avenue provider acted to facilitate the direct link between artist and income rather than taking the role of a middleperson. Artists did not need to rely upon the institutional (art world) networks already in place to effect sales of their work. Instead, they borrowed strategies from other areas of business that were low cost and easy to apply to their own situation.

In expanding exhibition and sales practices outside the existing institutional framework, these artists also took on the responsibility of promotion usually accorded to established dealers and galleries. And, as with the various exhibition practices, promotion practices were facilitated both by low cost and technological developments. Conventional promotion of the time took the shape of adverts, usually colour if possible, in specialist art journals. These adverts, of course, were expensive and available only, for the most part, to dealers with a sizeable budget for promotion. The majority of downtown artists could not cover this expense, particularly before 1983 when the



scene entered full-scale into the mainstream art world. Instead, artists and non-profit (or unprofitable as in many cases) galleries seized upon the cheap avenues for promotion offered by technological developments. For instance, the proliferation of photocopying technology facilitated the practice of leafleting. Usually associated with live entertainment events such as rock concerts, this method became one common and easily achieved route to promoting shows and other art events. Another was advertisements in newspapers, such as the one placed by Scharf. The more generalised readership of newspapers coincided with artists' interest in appealing directly to the public along with providing a cheap alternative to glossy colour advertisement. Furthermore, as in the case of sales practices, known artists continued to access their own means of advertisement. The purchasing of television advertising space during several 1990 late night programmes such as *David Letterman* and *Arsenio* by painter Marilyn Minter serves as one example. Journalist Paul Taylor (1991:H35) explained that "Ms Minter says she found it cheaper than advertising in art magazines" highlighting not only its relative affordability, but the direct action of the artist in promoting her own work.

In addition to these short-term strategies for promoting individual shows or services, there were also longer-term strategies for promoting their own trademarks, or identifiable characteristics. Many of the goods sold by artists were not simply sideline, moneymaking ventures. They were works themselves. But they were also a method of facilitating a broader public to access their particular signature aesthetic. The shopping bags designed for Bloomingdale by Kostabi could be purchased for two dollars and acted much in the same way as printed carrier bags act for shops, only in this case they promoted the recognition of Kostabi's work. Of course, it could be argued that these items also acted to promote his more expensive work, especially given the reasonably wealthy customer profile of Bloomingdale. Certainly this may have been the case for a fraction of Bloomingdale's shoppers. However, the majority would have had neither the interest nor the funds to invest in conventional art forms. Furthermore, although Kostabi's goods were specific to Bloomingdale, goods such as the Kruger and Holzer t-shirts were available to a broader customer range (and thus range of incomes) and so were not necessarily aimed as direct advertisements to collectors. Most importantly, though, such goods were not only for consumption but also for display, a key factor for their success as vehicles for promoting brand name recognition. They provided multiple avenues for public recognition of that artist's signature aesthetic both for the consumer and others encountering the purchased items.

Graffiti and other similarly public art works functioned in the same promotional manner despite their non-commercial nature as in the goods just described and their supposed anonymity. "By now [1987] much of downtown Manhattan has been blanketed with wall art of every description. Much of it is just so much noodling, doodling, and blatant self-promotion." (Frank and McKenzie 1987:61) This self-promotion was more complex than simple poster advertisements. Placement of work on the streets of New York became an avenue to promotion in itself. Between roughly 1981



and 1985, Haring, for instance, anonymously and illegally covered blank advertising panels in the New York subway with white chalk art works that became familiar to many subway travellers. After repeated exposure, Haring's signature style became *identifiable* to the commuting public, so much so that a following began to develop, even amongst the NYPD. (Gruen 1991:83-84; Hager 1982:9) This familiarity acted to link the subway works with both his goods and his paintings found in other arenas like galleries and museums, the media, and fashion.

Although other graffiti artists did produce consumable works including goods and conventional art works, the primary product of most spray paint graffiti artists was the non-consumable work itself and yet was equally a promotional form. Of course, the claim was often made during the period that graffiti was inherently "antimedia". (Foster 1985:48-52) However, as Pearlman (1997:198-208) has so adeptly argued, the graffiti movement encompassed many attitudes towards commercialisation and recognition. Not only did two groups, United Graffiti Artists and the National Organisation of Graffiti Artists, attempt to unionise during the 1970s and produce 'legal' works through exhibition and sales, but some of the artists such as Fred Brathwaite, alias Fab Five Freddy, aggressively marketed graffiti as legitimate art work.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these identifiable promoters, artists like Crash, Daze, Lady Pink and Futura 2000 were advertising their skill and their development of a style in the works themselves. The trains, in particular, acted as moving displays of their works, identifiable both by the style and their "tag" or signature. "Kids began to practice variations on their names and to develop identifying logos which could be read at a glance." (Cooper and Chalfant 1984:14) These works were intended to prompt the viewer to look for other (often elusive and short-lived) works under that tag, thereby promoting their body of works even if erasures by the New York City transit police and movement by the trains themselves constantly reshaped that oeuvre.

In both the cases of the goods and public works, the actual vehicles of promotion were low-cost and directly accessible to the artists. Whilst design for the goods was often commissioned, the producer, not the artist, paid their manufacture. Even in the case of goods produced by the artists, they usually took the form of cheap, accessible products such as t-shirts easily obtained by an artist on a low budget. Things such as custom t-shirt and baseball cap printing were widely available through retail outlets on high streets and in shopping malls. City surfaces also provided plentiful and cheap or illegally free surfaces on which to have their work seen. Also, as Cooper and Chalfant (14) highlighted, the development of permanent marker pens and aerosol spray paint provided artists with portable, quick-to-use materials, allowing them to take their practice to otherwise awkward and forbidden spaces like buildings and trains. Furthermore, due to the illegal nature of their artistic practice, they also benefited from the (free) concurrent media coverage. Such mention cannot only be seen to be important in hindsight, but was recognised at the time. The story of a reporter interested in interviewing graffiti writers recounted by a New York Transit Police detective highlights

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<sup>6</sup> See also, Castleman (1982:116-133).



the desire for media attention. “[W]e put the word out that we wanted seven to eight kids....That day how many kids showed up, about a hundred?” (Castleman 1982:79,81) All of these methods provided cheap and accessible vehicles to artists for their enhancing the visibility of their works.

As with the sales and exhibition practices, the nature of these types of promotion ensured a greater degree of control over the making and disseminating of one’s work. Without space in the art world institutional framework for the mass of new artists looking to forge their career, they could not rely on the established art world avenues to advance their work. Benefiting from cheap and unconventional promotion techniques, they creatively sought ways to side-step art-world-controlled public relations structures.

One area crucial to promotion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art world that requires special attention is critical exposure. Although this topic will be dealt with at greater length in chapter 6, the entrepreneurial activity in the area of criticism will be briefly addressed here. Attention from critics, like that of dealers and collectors, was hard to secure. With only a limited number of art publications and only a few general publications reporting on art, the number of critics was small and often already committed to other artist movements, styles and projects. As was the case with exhibitions, sales, and promotion, the downtown art community took on the project of art criticism themselves. And similar to the areas examined above, the lowering cost and availability of technology made these entrepreneurial ventures possible. For a start, vehicles for criticism were in short supply, and, without prior exposure, few existing publications were interested in examining what may have turned out to be an insignificant blip on the art world map. Indeed, in a 1979 report on contemporary New York art, critic Peter Frank referred only briefly to Punk Cinema (without mentioning any names); and, despite also mentioning Punk/No Wave music, he attributes this not to the Ramones, Blondie, Gray or any of the downtown performers but instead to conceptualist Lawrence Weiner, and minimalists Philip Glass and Steve Reich. No further mention was made of downtown activity in the review.

Certainly there were a few publications that touched upon the downtown arts activity such as *Punk Magazine*, published at the start of 1976, and the *East Village Eye*, which officially gave what was then known at the Lower East Side, a community label. Publications like these included many reports on visual art aspects of the scene and certainly provided positive, supportive coverage of Lower East Side artists and their works. However, artists were not content to await further critical vehicles and set out to publish their own journals and magazines that focused *primarily* upon artistic activity. Colab was especially active in the production of publications, mainly via member Becky Sussler, and produced the likes of *Spanner*, *Bomb*, and the *Artists Direct Mail Catalogue*. They also produced a specialist publication entitled *X Motion Picture Magazine*, which was a “collaboratively edited journal of film, photography, art and poetical reportage.” (Moore and Miller 1985:2-3) Other projects included *Red Letter Days* by PADD, and ABC No Rio put together a collection of critical



coverage on different groups in the downtown scene in their compendium, *ABC No Rio Dinero: The Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery*.

A notable aspect of these publications is that their pages were not filled with the writings of outside art critics, art historians or academics. Instead the contributors and editors were themselves scene participants who were involved with curating and co-ordinating shows and thus knew and supported this artistic production. In other words, the individual critics emerged from within the scene itself and tended to provide positive and critically engaged support for the work being produced. Some of this criticism stayed within the circles of the scene itself. Certainly publications like the *East Village Eye* possessed mainly local readerships, and *X Motion Picture Magazine* and *Red Letter Days* had a limited number of readers, usually those within the scene. This fact did present a problem in terms of reaching broader audiences. However, once attention turned to these artists in the early to mid 1980s, critics writing for 'internal' publications were able to crossover into broader publications, particularly given their insider knowledge and understanding of the scene's historical development. Critics such as Walter Robinson, Carlo McCormick, Glenn O'Brien and Diego Cortez published articles in relatively mainstream art journals such as *Art in America* and *Artforum*.

As in the cases of exhibitions, sales and promotion, criticism was only one role amongst others for the writers. Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick (1984), for instance, introduce themselves to readers in *Art in America* as all round art participants. Robinson, it is written, "is an artist and critic who has recently shown at Metro Pictures, Piezo Electric and the Kamikaze Club; he is also art editor for the East Village Eye." McCormick highlighted the same versatility with his write up, which said that he "is a writer on art for the Eye and the New York Beat, a part-time assistant at Gracie Mansion and Hal Bromm galleries, and organizer of some 30 shows in bars, nightclubs, and galleries..." (161) Here, the two represented themselves as taking part in most aspects of art world activities. Interestingly, in the reproduction of parts of this article in Moore and Miller's *ABC No Rio Dinero* (Robinson and McCormick 1985:42), one year after the original article's publication, they added: "This is not to boast of our versatility but to point up the readiness to cross boundaries that is common in the Village, an amorality that is based in part at least on amateurism." In other words, they specifically denied their status as 'professional' critics and reinforced their roles as creative members of the arts scene of the Lower East Side. Many other writers express similar sentiments in their 'criticism' and thereby diminish their interest in attaining 'professional' critical status.

These critics were less concerned with displaying academic knowledge or innovative interpretative skills as perhaps the academically-trained critics were, and rather, highlighted their roles as general scene 'participants' undifferentiated from artists, curators and dealers, particularly since, as was just indicated, they often played a combination of roles. As Pearlman (1997:210) has noted: "Articles by Moufarrege and Ricard...were usually breathless accounts of wild nights at clubs and gallery openings, dense with references to the outrageous actions of hipsters 'on the scene'."



Incorporated into these articles, then, was the 'insider' information usually conveyed in gossip and 'lifestyle' magazines. As such they blurred the lines between their own role as critic, their other possible roles, and the roles of those they were writing about. The main issue here is the choice made by scene participants, including curators, artists and dealers, to not only incorporate the role of the critic into their practice but also to amalgamate media forms to suit their circumstances and aims. Once again, members of the downtown art scene chose to take advantage of cheap printing costs to produce vehicles for criticism and drew upon their own resources to provide critical output when access to established art critical avenues was in short supply and focused elsewhere.

#### IV

Three features of the entrepreneurial practices surrounding exhibition, sales, promotion and criticism are noteworthy once understood in terms of the artists' aims to both achieve independence from the established art world and to reach a broader group of viewers not traditionally engaged in the consumption of experimental art. The first is that the sales strategies described above did not fit the conventions of artwork consumption as practised in the established art world. Frank and McKenzie's (1987:28) description of the *Times Square Show* sales desk as "an art emporium that combined the low-voltage commercialism of a museum bookstore with the messy array of gewgaws hawked in neighborhood novelty shops" provides us with a sense of the sales practice adopted by many artists at the time. Enamoured with the five-and-dime aesthetic, artists appeared to have appropriated the sales techniques of cheap novelty goods stores including the quality and appearance of the merchandise (note Rupp's plaster rats offered in Colab's catalogue in Fig. 16) and display. Although some works were in the traditional format of paintings and sculptures, the objects on offer in the shops and catalogues differed from the framed painting or sculptural piece as would be found in a conventional gallery. Instead, they were often in multiples mimicking the mass-produced quality of novelty goods (although they were often handcrafted) and took conventional 'merchandise' formats like t-shirts, buttons, postcards and assorted knick-knacks or else were extensions of conventional necessities like clothing and household goods. Once recognised as artists, others, such as Kostabi, sometimes moved into actual mass-manufacture with items such as shopping bags. In both cases, the works/goods usually remained comparable in price to similar non-artist-affiliated items.

However, the adoption of these sales techniques from *outside* art world structures was done with purpose. The aim of this activity was to directly affect the possibility of the artist to broaden the avenues of reception of one's work. For instance, the artist, Mike Glier (1980:40-1), made this connection explicit in his *Artforum* article on the "dime store figurine" aesthetic, in which he stated: "As an artist whose intention is to communicate, I am jealous of the figurine's success. Contemporary art, in comparison, seems unable either from disinterest or fear, to address a diverse audience....Ironically, the dime store figurine is already a successful, public sign system. The nature



of supply and demand economics has allowed the public to determine the imagery of these collectibles." Glier related art and broad appeal in the dime store aesthetic. As Pearlman (1997:228-9) noted about Haring, he chose to produce varying works with different audiences in mind, thus expanding reception horizons. Furthermore, she drew attention to the differing content between the works in order to highlight the intentional targeting of audiences. But even with Haring's deliberate shift in content for different viewers, the *creation* of these items was not separate from that of the 'serious' work as an oeuvre. Nor was the formation of his store, The Pop Shop, intended to divide his work into 'serious' and not 'serious'. Rather, it was intended to provide more accessible means to artwork consumption.

Artists recognised that opening up their sales avenues was not going to be enough to extend their artwork to the broader public. They also needed to offer items that were both affordable and useful to those consumers not interested in the consumption of contemporary artworks as items for collection. To reach this group, peripherally engaged with the art world at best, many of these artists harnessed their interest in the visual arts in order to branch out into various forms of design-related activities. Two such areas of interest taken by artists were fashion and interior and object design. Although these types of collaborations were not new (one might name Picasso, Dalí or Warhol, for instance<sup>7</sup>), connections between artists and fashion industry players such as Maripol and Fiorucci were less anomalous and more the norm in the downtown scene. What their undertaking entailed was less a singular act of showmanship than a change in the way a *group* of artists pursued their own practices in relation to one another. Exploiting social affiliations, artists seized the opportunities to expand their work into the realm of fashion. As early as 1979, Basquiat was painting t-shirts both for the Unique Clothing Warehouse and Fiorucci. By 1985, a wide variety of artists, Holzer, Kruger, and Friedman among them, had worked with designer Willi Smith on clothing projects. And, branching out from fashion designers to manufacturers, Scharf fashioned over twenty-two fabric designs, whilst Kostabi designed shopping bags, a line of jewellery, and jackets for the upscale department store, Bloomingdale. (Frank and McKenzie 1987:129)

Artists also made their own fashion items rather than producing works for those already in the business. Painter Keiko Bonk, for example, created dresses. Haring also designed his own hats, buttons and shirts both to sell ad hoc and for his store, The Pop Shop. Moreover, clubs and galleries were frequently willing to host fashion shows for artists. Club 57, and galleries Piezo Electric and New Math were amongst those who hosted fashion events. And, as with the production of exhibitions, the network of friends, artists, musicians, designers, filmmakers, performance artists, and gallery owners pitched in to produce the fashion shows acting as models, photographers and publicists.

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<sup>7</sup> One might also mention Bauhaus in this context. However, their success at combining art and industry was seriously compromised by the two competing aims of the school's staff members; artists stressing explorations in the arts *influenced* by industry, and industry practitioners looking to incorporate artistic explorations into practical design. For an account of this tug-of-war, see Forgács, 1991:passim.



Décor was a further outlet for the entrepreneurial artist, both in terms of objects and of living environments. As was shown in chapter 2, artists were engaged in practices that used the urban environment as a canvas through graffiti, murals and other artworks applied to the existing urban fixtures. Likewise, many of these artists also used indoor environments in the same manner. Both Scharf and Basquiat were well known for creating works on just about anything in the household domain including appliances, doors, windows, walls, bed frames, bed sheets, and floors. Such a practice naturally lent itself to the transition to design. Scharf took a particular interest in “customizing” objects for friends in their homes and in the club environment. Indicative of the enterprising tendency, he offered his “customizing” services through an advert in the newspaper. Others who branched out into object design activity included Haring (Fig. 17) and, most prolifically, Rhonda Zwillinger (Fig. 18). In addition to objects, environments themselves were subject to the extension of artistic enterprises. Aside from gallery installations, artists worked on projects both in both private and public spaces, designing interiors with customised furniture, walls and lighting. One of the major sources of commission for such space design was the nightclubs frequented by the networks of downtown artists. Clubs such as Club 57, Mudd club and the Palladium, where one of Scharf’s black-light rooms existed, all sponsored work from artists to design spaces within their walls. In working with areas of design such as fashion, objects and environments (with costs that were often covered by the commissioning party), these artists demonstrated an active pursuit of opportunities to extend their practice as artists into commercial areas outside the gallery. For other artists, this blurring of boundaries between the production of conventional items and ‘art works’ along with the adoption of sales practices outside the art world was even more noteworthy since these projects were not ‘sidelines’ nor were they intended solely as a means to support their more serious work. The production of these types of goods and the avenues through which they offered such works melded into their practice as artists.

The second key aspect is that, despite the venture into commercial activities, these production and sales practices supplied little direct aid in providing art world success to unknown artists and their work. Scharf’s second one-man show<sup>8</sup>, held at the commercial Fun Gallery in September 1982, sold absolutely nothing, and the most notable event of a show he held at the Xenon disco was that one painting was stolen. In fact, before roughly 1985, he received little notable critical press (Pearlman 1997:205,n28), and collectors showed little interest in his work, despite his entrepreneurial ventures. Neither were these practices successful as moneymaking ventures for unknowns. Scharf’s aforementioned advert, for example, garnered him one respondent. These unequivocal failures to profit from such ventures were not uncommon.

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<sup>8</sup> His first one-man show was at Club 57 in 1979. I have not found any information on the commercial success of that show. However, based on the accounts of the club’s place in the scene, its clientele and his overall artistic career, I would assume that he sold little (probably to friends) or nothing at all.



However, the activities' importance lies not with their capacity to provide art world ranking or produce profits but their ability to foster direct links between the artist and consumer. Unknown artists did not, as would be expected, have direct access to the channels through which collectors' attention could be solicited. Engaging in the commercial activities as outlined above was a method to circumvent this problem in its ability to facilitate direct connections with a public interested in artistic activity, which gave the artist control over the dissemination of his/her works. The fact that the goods and services provided by the artists were part of their overall artistic production and were not sideline projects, meant that these created avenues were connections between public and *works*, regardless of their commercial formats. By participating in these avenues of engagement with the public, artists could directly solicit the attention of spectators and consumers for their works.

Of course, as an unknown artist, these links were confined largely to participants of the scene, thereby limiting the potential for widespread control of sales by artists. Although notoriety amongst one's peers was an important ingredient for success in the larger art market, as has been noted by Alan Bowness (1989:11-21) in his essay *The Conditions of Success* and was certainly the case for downtown artists, the longer term impact of the establishment of these avenues between producer and consumer can be seen in their continued pursuit by successful practitioners. Certainly many of the artists mentioned thus far who established their success during the 1980s such as Holzer, Kruger, Haring and Kostabi, would have been familiar with, if not actual participants in, such entrepreneurial activity before they gained widespread critical attention. As the examples showed, they unquestionably pursued such activity *after* their rise to art world fame. The significance of their continued activity along these lines is that they cemented their power of decision-making with regards to the consumption of their works outside of the established art world institutions such as the dealer/collector relation and the museum.

This third feature provides an important understanding as to how these practices, carried over from unknown artists to established figures, significantly affected art world institutional structures. Many of the practices themselves were not new. In fact, they were not even new to the Lower East Side. Claes Oldenburg's *The Store* opened in December 1961 at 107 East Second Street offering a similar experience to the Five and Dime, the shelves packed with cheap consumer goods and decorative merchandise. Much like the downtown artists of the late 70s and early 80s, he made little money in this venture, and closed down in debt two short months after opening. Stefan Eins also pursued a similar venture in the early SoHo days with his *3 Mercer Street Store* that sold "cheap multiple-art objects". (Frank and McKenzie 1987:40)<sup>9</sup> However, these projects were short lived and did not carry through as part of the artists' overall practice. These few examples were simply aberrations in the rather more controlled system of the artist-dealer-collector sales triangle. What numerous successful artists of the period under consideration demonstrate is that

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<sup>9</sup> Eins was also the founder of the South Bronx graffiti gallery *Fashion Moda* established in the autumn of 1978. However, the South Bronx 'space' did not adopt the same overt commercial premise as the *3 Mercer Street Store*.



instead of relinquishing the direct control established through the initial entrepreneurial ventures, they continued to maintain that aspect of control in their artistic careers. What became common practice was the pursuit of an artistic career within the art world of dealers and collectors yet the simultaneous maintenance of the direct connection between producer and consumer.

## V

I have been arguing that the entrepreneurialism practised by these artists, and its consequences for art world structures, were not as straightforward as they appeared, especially to those who shuddered at any hint of overt commercial activity amongst artists. Certainly the simple correlation between accelerated price rises in the art market and the entrepreneurship of these artists that underlies the many criticisms of this movement is misconceived. Most basically, this can be demonstrated from the perspective of the market itself. Despite the flurry of artistic activity on the Lower East Side since the Punk era began in 1974, most critics acknowledged that the broad-scale media and public interest in the art world did not explode into full-scale hype until roughly 1982/83. Robinson and McCormick (1984:141) claimed that it was during the summer of that year the East Village became a recognised 'scene' in its own right. Furthermore, the market itself does not begin to show exceptional growth until 1985, indicating that the remarkable amounts of money paid for works did not become a phenomenon until after the development of the downtown scene.<sup>10</sup>

Two arguments have usually been implied when making the connection between the artists' entrepreneurialism and the high prices paid for works. The first has been that since many of these artists were young when they achieved recognition, they must have accelerated this process (or the process of recognition was accelerated) by their active promotion of their works. Aside from the fact that many of them had been working as artists for longer than this argument implies (often seven to ten years prior to recognition), the youth of these artists is singled out here as an anomalous in the usual development of artists' careers. This assumption, of course, is false. Many artists, particularly after 1950, came to prominence early on in their careers. Ginsburgh and Penders (1997:221), in their study "Land Artists and Art Markets", noted that galleries in the late 1960s and early 1970s "showed [Land] artists who were still very young, and sometimes had not even finished their training." Irving Sandler's claim (1984:14) that "many new commercial galleries [of the 1960s]...and old ones...took on avant-garde newcomers" only serves to reinforce the point. Although those newcomers may or may not have been young, they certainly had not put in the time and effort of long term art world veterans – famous or unknown. Many new artists of the post-war generations did not slave away unrecognised for years. The fact, then, that many of the downtown artists were

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<sup>10</sup> See Heilbrun and Gray (1993:chapter 9) whose analyses have demonstrated that the 1980s market was exceptional. Interestingly, they revealed through a study of the Sotheby's Index that from 1980 to 1990 contemporary art rose at a slower rate than other auction categories of art. The most exceptional growth was to be found in the category of Impressionists followed by other 19<sup>th</sup> century European works.



young when first shown in galleries should not stand out as unusual and, therefore, should not hold any special significance when understanding their adoption of entrepreneurial practices.

The second inferred argument has been based on the supposition that the huge price rises in their works were anomalous as compared to artists of other movements and eras at the same point in their careers (although Pop artists came a close second). Because the rises were so dramatic, the argument contends that the power of their marketing and force of their entrepreneurial activity helped to make their work more saleable. In this case, however, the comparison between artists of different eras provides a faulty standard for the conclusion reached. What is more crucial is an examination of the context in which these artists worked and the effect of that context on other types of works. Although downtown art prices rose dramatically, especially after 1984, so did those of most other works regardless of their form. Ginsburgh and Penders (1997:224,226) revealed that Land Art sold regularly at auctions after 1985, following the more “general trends of contemporary art markets”. In addition, the returns on Land Art works were in line with other contemporary movements at twenty percent, more than that for Old Masters at just under sixteen percent. The authors concluded that “the evolution of prices obtained by Land Artists is identical to what is obtained by other artists.” (226)

The question of form is an implicit lynchpin in the second argument. Downtown entrepreneurial activity was typified in the minds of many by their tendency to produce works that acted like commercial products (for example, T-shirts, buttons, paintings, sculptures and other multiples). The correlation between art object and commercial value rests upon the concept of use – be it for display or prestige – and, this theoretical relationship was active in analyses of the period. Thus the increased monetary value of their works was a result of the purported inherent properties of the object itself. In other words, paintings and sculptures were bought, displayed and sold more easily than conceptual works without a material base since these works possessed an inherent use value. However, the conclusion of Ginsburgh and Penders (1997:226) indicated that even without the material base, the works and practices of artists seeking to deny art a material base and, therefore, commodification, were still subject to a commercial value in similar ways to other artists. They highlighted the fact that, “[t]hey [land artists] also relied on dealers, shows in galleries and museums in the same way as any artist tries to do it.” By integrating their works and careers into a commercial system that was geared towards flexibility in terms of its product (at least since the Impressionist period, dealers and collectors had adapted to incorporate formal and ideological challenges into the commercial world of art), their ‘products’, material or not, acquired prestige value that ultimately translated into commercial value. As such they were susceptible to art market fluctuations. Equally, the objects produced by downtown artists were equally subject to these changes.



The point I am trying to make is not that the exact monetary values of the two were comparable. There were factors that made downtown art works, in some cases, more desirable, driving up their price; their place as the most contemporary of art movements, their connection to a scene that was considered 'hip' at the time, their use of imagery and ideas designed to appeal beyond the art audience. Their objecthood, however, played a lesser role. After all, if one draws from the example of the service industry as a whole, the 'product' equally can be the experience, something upon which conceptual, land and (especially) performance art all rely. Further, although the value of their works undoubtedly were influenced by their promotional strategies, and, as we will examine in chapter 4, their use of entertainment production and distribution practices, the scale and speed of the works' price rises were attributable in large part to the coincident general art market growth.

Underpinning these explanations for the high prices fetched for downtown work, particularly those given by its detractors, lies the basic assumption that the motivating factor to engage in these types of entrepreneurial practice, given their fundamental link with capitalism, is accrual of wealth. Such an inference, however, is just too simplistic. Studies investigating the motivations of entrepreneurs in general indicate that moneymaking does not play a primary role in the starting up of a business. "The motivation for people to form businesses is the topic of an extensive literature. Individual studies have found various stimuli. Nonetheless, consistent themes emerge – the need to achieve, individual expression, etc. Significant monetary reward, curiously, is rarely among them." (Dennis 1992:129n22) This seems to have been the case with many of the downtown artists, at least initially. Patti Astor, for instance, claimed to have chosen the commercial option for her Fun Gallery to, aptly, have parties, show the work of her friends (which would have been limited by government grant specifications), and avoid the paperwork involved with a reliance on grants. (Sandler 1984:17) The gallery never did succeed financially due to the fact that this was not her main priority, and in 1984 she held her final, and now famous, 'Sink or Swim' show/sale. In fact, it seems that despite the entrepreneurial nature of their activity, many within the scene did not actually think about these projects as business. Gracie Mansion claimed that "[o]ne could and did open a gallery with no money or art world connections. In fact, if I had known anything about business or the art world, I would have never opened. Thank God I was naïve." (cited in Frank and McKenzie 1987:135) Serious moneymaking strategies do not seem to lie at the heart of these activities.

In addition to plain greed, there was a belief that these artists were flagrantly and willingly merging art and capitalism. Such a vision was not hard to accept given the high profile of artists like Kostabi who imbued his entire practice with the relationship of art to money, posing in Fig. 19 as "St. Market". This upset both conservative and leftist critics alike given that they held art to either be beyond economic concerns or else as a tool to fight capitalism respectively. Again, the simplistic correlation between Reaganism and the development of entrepreneurial practice in art fuelled these



readings despite artists' often open criticism of such a merger. In one episode of Glenn O'Brien's cable television programme, *Party TV*, featuring a live phone-in to the guests (who included a wide variety of downtown scene participants), someone claiming to be Atlantic Records giant, Jerry Wexler, called in saying "There's a lot of talent around this country and that's what makes this country a wonderful country." Basquiat responded by yelling into the phone, "It makes you fucking money you art pimp," displaying a cynical and defiant attitude toward the money circulating in the downtown scene. Works too manifested such a concern. David Wojnarowicz (Fig. 20), for instance, dealt directly with the subject. Here we can see an evidently negative portrayal of the influence of wealth and money.<sup>11</sup> Even Kostabi's work is imbued with a humorous irony given its over-the-top portrayal of money worship. There were, of course, contradictions in such positions given the monetary success of their work that critics were quick to point out. But, as has been continually reiterated, few artists saw direct monetary gain from the kinds of entrepreneurial activities in which they engaged. The motivations, then, must reside elsewhere.

As suggested throughout this chapter, one motivating factor was the hunt for opportunities in a saturated art world where increasing numbers of artists were vying for a limited number of institutionally available places. In so doing, these scene participants were able to circumvent the established art world structures, as is evident in Mansion's statement above that highlights the lack of necessity for art world connections when getting involved in art activity. This gave all participants, in particular artists who often played more than one role, increased direct control over the exhibition and sale of their works. This increased control is especially salient given that many critics focused on the power of conventional art world dealers at the time. Hughes (1989:42), for instance, bemoaned the presence of high profile, slick dealers like Mary Boone and Larry Gagosian and despairingly predicted a type of international corporate-style 'mega-dealing' comprised of only a few, dominant galleries for the future of art. This vision, of course, completely ignored the continuation of entrepreneurial control by artists even as they moved into more established art world circles.

A second motivation, that of creativity in the production and distribution process, may be less visible but equally present. Sociologist Keith Negus (1995) explained that investigations into the operations of creativity and commerce in the arts have divided the two into definitively antithetical acts. His argument highlights the degree to which commerce and creativity develop concurrently within the *process* of production. The two, he argues, cannot be categorically divided and opposed. Negus stops short of merging the two saying that they are merely intertwined since he expresses a concern that by viewing the two as necessarily linked, he risks his argument being read as "a celebration of capitalism itself." (327) Despite this disclaimer, his distinction between

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<sup>11</sup> This image, notably, is from 1985, the year that saw the beginning of the art market's surge in prices and interest.



creativity and commerce was not based on any rigorous analytical definition.<sup>12</sup> However, both Dennis (1993) and sociologists Peterson and Berger (1971) have attributed creativity to the entrepreneurial act itself. Dennis claimed that “the formation of a new enterprise demands that an individual(s) identify a market opportunity and assemble the resources to exploit it. The act requires entrepreneurial alertness to discover the opportunity, creativity to fashion a response, and technical competence (and frequently imagination) to organise the resources in a way that will materialize the idea. The result of this process is an economic creation known as business.” (112) Although Dennis’ enthusiasm for entrepreneurialism strikes the reader as rather celebratory, a creative entrepreneurial engagement by downtown artists does shed light on these activities. Certainly many of the ventures undertaken by artists and their friends were inventive solutions (or attempted solutions) to the difficulties arising from their restricted access to conventional art world institutions and their lack of funding to construct any comparable networks. Merchandise catalogues and stores, give-aways, the use of clubs, apartments and abandoned buildings for exhibition venues, the application of their practice to different environments all required creative thinking and action. This is not to say that these were entirely new concepts or practices or that they completely abandoned the art world model. Rather, they creatively adjusted those structures to fit their requirements by amalgamating practices from different art-historical periods such as some fledgling Pop art practices, and small-scale merchandise enterprise to form their own networks of production and distribution. After all, as discussed in chapter 1, agency is defined by the actor’s capability to choose between, integrate and/or reject existent structures previously un/associated.

As I have just demonstrated, demographic pressures in the form of an increase in the number of artists working in the downtown area, the scarcity of public funding, and the difficulty of entering into the art world were highly significant systemic influences on the downtown arts scene but have been, on the whole, neglected in art historical accounts. What a morphogenetic analysis has revealed is that these systemic influences led to the structural and ideational diversification of art world practices, which, in turn, enabled artists to gain greater control over all aspects of their work and marginalised, to an extent, the roles of the dealer and the art critic within the New York art world. Yet the main economic influences so far examined, corporate sponsorship, gentrification and entrepreneurialism, were not the only influences to affect these artists. In extending our study beyond just their physical works, we can find another crucial source for their production and distribution practices. As we will now explore in chapter 4, they also incorporated institutional practices from the alternative entertainment industry.

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<sup>12</sup> He did attempt to distinguish between the two but ultimately was more successful at highlighting the inadequacies of other arguments than convincing the reader of his definitions of creativity and commerce. Nonetheless, his practical understanding of creativity and commerce being embedded in the same production process remains compelling.



## Chapter 4

### Production and Distribution II: “Let Me Entertain You”

*“I was repulsed by what I saw people putting themselves through, the hustling to try to get anywhere in the art world, so my natural reaction was to move into a world that had no pretense of nobility.”*

David Byrne (cited in Shore 1980:79)

So far, the entrepreneurial activity examined has been characterised by an adoption of retail practices not usually found within the ‘high’ art world. This aspect of downtown artists’ production and distribution practices rejected, by and large, the traditional route of art sales via the dealer/gallery/collector relations already established in recognised ‘avant-garde’ areas such as SoHo and Greenwich Village or the more conservative 57<sup>th</sup> Street. Instead they opted for a more direct relationship with the consuming public through direct mail, catalogues, ‘five and dime’ style storefronts, multiples and design-based work. When engaging with art world practices such as curating and exhibition, artists filled these roles themselves thereby bypassing the customary control of dealers over art display and sales. Furthermore, through their use of these retail practices, and their choices regarding exhibition and sales, they attempted to reach out to a different public than the one engaged in traditional art world collecting. These practices, as may be evident, evolved from rethinking the production and distribution of object-based art. Criticism of these practices was voiced by those committed to conceptual, performance and other non-object based media. These critics viewed such a focus on design, multiples and other object-oriented work, often created with sales in mind, as a negative reversal of progress made by the previous generation of artists to thwart any relationship between art and a capitalist accrual of value.<sup>1</sup> However, to narrow a study of downtown artists and their practices to object production would only provide a partial view of their activity and lead to inaccurate conclusions. Just as entrepreneurialism led to structural and ideational diversification, as was shown in the last chapter, so did the adoption of adjacent entertainment practices broadened the range of artistic activity. A significant aspect to the production and distribution of artists in downtown New York during the late 1970s and early 1980s was indeed their engagement with non-object-based media, in particular, ‘alternative’ mass media.

Although much was made of the existence of Punk, New Wave and No Wave music within the art scene, art critics did not exert much effort analysing the relationship between artists and musicians or their shared activity. As Simon Frith and Howard Horne (1987:24) have pointed out in their landmark study on the relationship between art schools and pop music: “Laurie Anderson is hailed as the only crossover act.”<sup>2</sup> Frith and Horne’s cultural studies

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<sup>1</sup> As we saw in chapter 2, the success of those artists may be more symbolic than actual given that, although they are less favoured by collectors, their work has traversed art world routes of dealing and collecting and responds to art market fluctuations in a similar manner to other movements and media.

<sup>2</sup> Aside from just John Walker and Hal Foster, the critics to which Frith and Horne referred, this incredibly narrow view is remarkably common. Some examples include Levin (1988:187-189) and McCaffery (1990:27) who also included Patti Smith.



perspective led them to examine “what happens to art ideas as they are diffused in pop generally.” What is of particular interest from an art historical perspective is the influence travelling in the reverse direction. More specifically, rather than the spread of ideas, it is the adoption of practices that will be the main focus as artists developed their relationship with the burgeoning ‘alternative’ music scene and the rejuvenated underground cinema. In this chapter, I will attempt to widen the examination of not only the connections between art and music as found within the downtown scene, but also those forged with other mass media such as television, video, and film, and live media such as performance and theatre. These relationships facilitated the adoption of production and distribution practices that included marketing, exhibition and celebrity. Indeed, as we will see, the lines between the roles of visual artist and those of filmmaker, performer or musician blur.

# I

Certainly the traffic in ideas and imagery between art worlds and commercial entertainment has been historically heavy, not least during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and notably so with the rise of Pop art in the 1960s. Crow, in his much discussed book *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (1996a), countered the claim that the avant-garde has always stood apart from popular, often mass-produced, visual culture. He claims that “[f]rom its beginnings, the artistic avant-garde has discovered, renewed, or re-invented itself by identifying with marginal, ‘non-artistic’ forms of expressivity and display – forms improvised by other social groups out of the downgraded materials of capitalist manufacture.” (3) His argument was that in order for the avant-garde to distinguish itself from ‘common culture’, the two must stand in a necessary oppositional relation. This relationship defines the avant-garde since it draws upon aspects of pop or mass culture, thereby exploring and exposing the other’s mechanics whilst highlighting the ways in which its own production, display and philosophical perspective are different. In a conventional art historical manner, Crow’s examples, including Warhol’s tabloid appropriations and Ross Bleckner’s painterly surfaces, focus upon the textual relationship between the two, and occasionally, as in the case of Pollack’s murals, their functional use as objects.

Artists have also historically engaged with popular media such as film, music, performance and theatre. Even the most cursory glance into the different avant-garde movements such as Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism reveals a wealth of experimental activity with these forms. Despite an emphasis on painting by the Abstract Expressionists, performance and music in particular continued to be a significant aspect of Post-WWII artistic activity in America. Thomas Crow’s study of art in the 1960s (1996b), for instance, underscored that the strict media boundaries outlined by formalist criticism were both explored and challenged by artists keen to engage with forms not considered, in some (influential) circles at least, as having much to do with the visual arts. Initial crossovers in this period were within the beat movement, as exemplified by Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank’s 1959 film *Pull My Daisy* (itself a loose adaptation of the third act of Jack Kerouac’s play *The Beat Generation*), which included appearances by painters Larry Rivers and Alice Neel. Relationships between musicians such as



John Cage and Charlotte Moorman to performance and conceptual artists (Fluxus members in particular) were integral to their work. Photography too was a key medium for artists as wide-ranging as the beat artist Robert Frank, pop artist Ed Ruscha, and conceptualist Bruce Nauman. Reciprocally, artists primarily noted for working in 'unconventional' media, also produced work in painting and sculpture, like structuralist filmmaker Michael Snow.

More relevant to this study, Bacigalupi (1993) traced a genealogical trail from Situationism through punk music to Neo-expressionist artists like David Salle, Julian Schnabel and Robert Longo. Bacigalupi's interest rests mainly with the transfer of ideas (and their manifestations in art) through personal contact between people and environments in which the ideas would have been circulating. What appears to be less evident in any of these studies, however, is an examination of the substantive relationships between art institutions, such as schools, galleries and museums, and the popular entertainment industries. This may be, in part, because those relationships for much of the twentieth century were, on the whole, infrequent and erratic. Certainly, artists working in the second half of the century experimented with performance and music, often with the specific aim to disrupt the capitalist appropriation of art. However, such work, rather than moving outside art world circles, was integrated by artists into an art context. Affiliations with galleries, art schools and museums remained fundamental to their production context and exhibition practices. Ties between artists and the art world networks were not, generally, circumvented, at least not with respect to their choice of medium. Working with film or music did not signal a radical break from the art world.

The work of Andy Warhol, of course, defies this generalization. As has been extensively studied, he ventured beyond the art world when engaging in projects such as his stage show, *Plastic Exploding Inevitable* featuring the Velvet Underground<sup>3</sup>, his films such as *Chelsea Girls* (1966), and his magazine *Interview*, not mention his work in design. His engagement with these other media, then, constituted a shift into a popular commercial context. As such, his artistic activity has been assumed by many to be the principal inspiration of downtown artistic activity. Jack Sargeant (1999:9n4), for instance, argued for a lineage between Warhol and downtown punk film and performance by claiming that Warhol set "a tradition of cross-fertilisation between New York art/rock and underground film scenes" that continued into the 1980s. Frank and McKenzie (1987:11) equally stressed Warhol as the role model for downtown artists by claiming that whilst other artists of the 1970s were "serious, retiring, emphatically unglamorous nonpersonalities" and were thus found to be worthy of rejection, Warhol stood out along with "rock stars and their Hollywood counterparts [who] dominated the media...."

There is little doubt that many of the engagements with film and music by downtown artists paralleled those by Warhol rather than those by, say, Fluxus. As Sargeant has quite rightly argued, the cross between art, alternative pop/rock music and underground film that will be examined with respect to artists in the late seventies and early eighties was equally present

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<sup>3</sup> The title, of which, came from Warhol's first attempt at a publication, an underground newspaper that was included as an insert with the Pop issue of Aspen. See Ubuweb (2003a) and (2003b).



with respect to Warhol. In addition, a few early affiliations can be traced. Glenn O'Brien, for instance, was the music critic for *Interview* magazine before becoming involved in the downtown scene. Chris Stein, a founding member of Blondie and who was equally active in the downtown scene, opened for the Velvet Underground as a teenager and was described by Frith and Horne (1990:112) as interested in both the Factory and the Velvets.<sup>4</sup> However, the existence of Warhol and the publicity of his activity was not enough to generate the widespread and penetrating influence of 'alternative' mass media forms and practices with this new generation of artists. After all, Warhol's career and general media profile was at a significant low point by the mid to late seventies, and this too-easy connection is most often based on parallels rather than direct influence or contextual evidence. Perhaps the emphasis upon Warhol as an originator misses the significance of his own relationship to underground film in particular. His self-promotion and his collection of larger-than-life 'stars' was, in fact, not peculiar to Warhol, as some have characterised it,<sup>5</sup> but was a direct engagement with existing underground film conventions of the period. Drawing upon the likes of Jack Smith's outrageous stars and personae, the Kuchar Brothers excessively camp renditions of Hollywood melodramas, and the active marketing of underground film (and underground film stars) to a popular audience by Jonas Mekas, Warhol participated in, rather than originated, such developments.

This is not to deny that bringing such practices into his artwork was not novel. But for art critics Warhol's activity has been seen to be monumental. And, although symbolically this may be the case, his individual engagement with underground film and music did little to alter art world configurations. The combination of the fact that Warhol maintained his traditional dealer relationship with Leo Castelli, thus keeping him within the traditional art world confines, with his involvement in underground filmic practices that was not widespread amongst artists at the time, meant that his activity did not *substantially* challenge art world production or distribution. The existing relationships between artist, dealer, collector, curator, museum and critic continued, even with respect to Warhol himself.

This is not to say, of course, that downtown activity that integrated art, rock/pop and film was completely unprecedented. One trend that has emerged from the late 1950s has been the movement of artists and art school students in particular, into the pop music industry. Frith and Horne (1987) discussed the history of human traffic moving from the former into the latter, and traced the ideas they carried with them. Frith and Horne (113) quite rightly highlighted the significance of the Mercer throughout the 1970s as a meeting point between aspiring pop musicians (rather than simply art or experimental musicians) and artists, providing an important precursor to the downtown clubs' formats of integrating art with pop performances. Similarly, Bacigalupi (1993) highlighted the relationship between Malcolm McLaren and Jamie Reid's art school backgrounds and their development of British punk's values and aesthetics. Such

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<sup>4</sup> Warhol did become much more directly involved, particularly through Jean-Michel Basquiat. However, it is my contention that his direct involvement only occurred in the 1980s and was not a major presence in the scene's earlier years.

<sup>5</sup> Bacigalupi (1993:100), for instance, personalised his development of Factory personas when saying that "[h]is idolization of the famous led to the creation of his own panopoly of superstars...."



movement was equally in evidence amongst downtown scene participants. Both Chris Stein and Alan Vega (of Suicide) were art school graduates, James Chance (a.k.a. James White), Adele Bertai and members of Pere Ubu hailed from Cleveland Institute of Arts, whilst the Talking Heads members formed while attending the Rhode Island School of Design. (Frith and Horne 1987:112-113) While this trend certainly merits attention, a more noteworthy shift with respect to artistic practices is not simply movement of people from one cultural arena to another, or even the importation of ideas, but the collaboration of practitioners, the shared production and distribution strategies, and even shared audiences. Only that direct contact, and not the indirect historical influence of Warhol, could have facilitated the exchange of ideas and shifts in practice within the downtown scene of the following decade. Nonetheless, a significant parallel exists between downtown artists and Warhol, namely the choice to engage in the independent underground film scene. As will be shown, the same do-it-yourself drive that fuelled 1960s underground film also propelled both punk/no wave and a rejuvenated underground film scene in the mid 1970s, developments made accessible to artists through technological advances, geographic agglomeration, and their own reflexive understanding of the mass media's institutional processes. This diversification into an adjacent sphere facilitated engagement with mass media forms and means, giving rise to the commercial character of downtown artists' mass and live media.

## II

Certain contextual factors made this relationship more viable than had previously been the case. During the early seventies, the various entertainment industries, particularly film and recorded music, were intensely integrated and monopolised. As Martin (1995:251-252) has explained with respect to music, "the majors were 'the only game in town'." Although some independence for various production and distribution elements did exist (due in large part to anti-trust regulation), most companies catered for the big film and music corporations. Recording and marketing were extremely expensive, and production facilities and financial capital were concentrated, making the production of alternative commercial entertainment products – that is, those without recourse to the established industry – extremely difficult.

However, by the mid-1970s, changes in contextual conditions opened avenues of cultural production that had been previously inaccessible to artists, filmmakers and musicians. Three interrelated factors – technology, agglomeration and reflexive understanding, facilitated the production of forms outside of mainstream institutional boundaries. The first and most immediately recognisable change was a series of technological developments that saw a flurry of new – and cheap – mass media forms. Cassettes, portable cassette players, decks and turntables, video, cable, and super-8 film with synchronized sound all appeared for 'amateur' use and were subsequently seized upon by would-be cultural producers including punks, rappers, and underground filmmakers. (Cowen 1998:174; McQuaid 1994:152; Martin 1995:252; McGraith 1990:82-83; Hoberman 1981b:passim) Of course, this technology in itself would have made little impact outside of purely amateur 'at home' (i.e. non-commercial) production had



production and distribution facilities and technical staff remained unavailable. Since most mass media entertainment production is collaborative in several respects, the ability to access both equipment and people was a necessary condition, especially for those without substantial capital, like downtown cultural producers. Unlike filmmakers and musicians tied to major networks of cultural production, they would have been unable to participate in a production and distribution process that required travel, large shipping expenses, and importation of required materials or expertise. New York, then, provided not only a base for visual art activity, as discussed in chapter 3, but also a centre for mass media entertainment production. Agglomeration, then, was the second condition that enabled downtown cultural producers since New York housed an infrastructure of studios, venues and human resources upon which these artists were able to build. A third key contextual condition that facilitated alternative use of mass media was a reflexive understanding of the dynamics and channels of cultural production. Hesmondhalgh (1999:37) points to this factor as important in the development of alternative music production, particularly with punk where musicians even sang about the industry itself, such as “EMI” by the Sex Pistols. As such, they were in a position to knowledgeably identify different production and distribution practices of their own products. These conditions were integral to the interface between downtown artists and alternative entertainment practices.

The first and most obvious aspect of this interface was the widespread interaction between the different types of cultural producers in downtown New York. One-off projects were one common area of interactivity. For instance, aside from pursuing their own individual work, many different artists worked with Glenn O’Brien on his *TV Party* series that ran for four years from December 1978 on Manhattan Cable. The production team included filmmakers Amos Poe and James Nares, musicians Walter Steding and Chris Stein, publisher Becky Sussler and graffitiist Fab Five Freddy (Fred Brathwaite). Others also made guest appearances including actor Tina L’Hotsky, artists David McDermott and Jean-Michel Basquiat and singer Debbie Harry. (Fantina 1980; *Bomb* 1981; O’Brien n.d.) Many of the period’s key underground filmmakers, including Poe, and the Bs, Eric Mitchell, and Richard Kern used numerous musicians, (for example Harry, Lydia Lunch and Richard Hell) and artists (McDermott, Basquiat, Rockets Redglare and Rammell Zee) as actors. They also worked with individual musicians and bands and musicians, such as MC Kool Kyle seen in the film *Downtown ’81* (Fig. 21), on soundtracks and diegetic music. Musicians, too, joined forces with others on their works. John Zorn, for instance used prose on his album *Spillane* (1987) that was written by fellow musician Arto Lindsay and read by musician, actor and screen composer, John Lurie. (McCaffery 1990) The group Blondie not only included references to rap and specifically to graffitiist Fab Five Freddy in their 1980 song “Rapture”, but several graffitiists including Basquiat appear in their video as does their work. (Fig. 22)

Large-scale events incorporated mixtures of art, music, film and performance, and collaboration between artists working in different media. The Nova Convention in December 1978 was one such event that included Jack Smith, Laurie Anderson and the B52s. Joint efforts like the *Times Square Show* in 1979, as well as many club-sponsored events, were collaborative



both on the level of exhibition/curation and organisation whereby groups of artists worked together (albeit in an unregimented and often unstructured way) to co-ordinate the simultaneous display of the different media. Umbrella organisations like Colab and Fashion Moda formed key networks under which those working in different media could organise joint projects. As already mentioned, such organisations shared equipment, as well as acted as a pool of human resources. Shared venues such as the prolific club circuit also provided avenues for multi-media events given their broad capacity for multi-purpose activity, unlike, say, a gallery, which usually had a narrow and confined institutional use.

So in both specific and large-scale projects, and through umbrella organisations and shared venues, artists not only socialised but worked with adjacent cultural producers. Certainly these connections provided the means by which ideas of production and distribution could cross over. And indeed they did since these connections affected the very heart of artistic production. After all, young artists felt that the visual arts had become stagnant, bogged down by erudite ambitions. Having made this same point, John Rockwell (1983:237-238) explained that, “[p]erformance art and rock performance offered a fresh challenge to many young artists.”

These opportunities, then, prompted artists to adopt alternative entertainment practices, like film and music, making themselves less ‘visual’ artists in any strict sense and more cultural producers. The use of the term ‘alternative’ is important here because, not only do some of the practices differ from those of the mainstream or ‘major’ entertainment industries, but so did the channels of marketing, exhibition and distribution. As Booth and Kuhn (1990) have shown, the economic support system for different types of music will vary according to the production and distribution variables. Pop music, according to their study, typically includes the greatest number of intermediaries whereby ownership and operation of the technological means for recording, distributing and merchandising is in different hands to those of the musicians. In addition, patronage is indirect, with income from consumers channelled back through managers, promoters, concert hall owners and shop owners. (419,426) Although music, television and films produced in the downtown scene were characterised to some extent by these features (bands were still reliant, for instance, upon venue owners through whom door takings were usually channelled), they deliberately minimised these intermediaries by taking control themselves. The New Cinema, for instance, was an attempt to provide the owner/filmmakers with their own means of exhibition. Furthermore, there was little visible interference from large entertainment companies, (at least initially). As Peterson and Berger (1971:98) noted, large organisations in the entertainment industry tend to distance themselves from turbulent areas of creation and production by isolating new forms and minimising financial risks. Given the tumultuous creative environment in downtown New York at the time, there should be little surprise that corporations, although perhaps interested in developments (especially with respect to music), did not become involved in such risky enterprises as anti-mainstream bands, underground films and ‘art TV’.



Nonetheless, Booth and Kuhn (426) characterised pop music (and other mass media forms) as maintaining “the intermediary who is fundamentally engaged in a profit-making enterprise...This individual, then, needs to earn enough money to reimburse any capital outlay, but also to earn his or her own subsistence from the enterprise.” This feature of mass media entertainment remained with the downtown cultural producers. This is not to say that they were solely money-driven. Had that been the case, the attempt to penetrate the established realm of entertainment would have offered far more monetary reward with, in many cases, less risk. However, as many writers on independent entertainment forms have noted, the aim of these entertainment producers was to provide an alternative product to the public. The creation of their own production and distribution channels by which to accomplish this was, therefore, an important element since alternate routes were too restricted. The art world, although open in terms of textual experimentation, was limited by its narrow appeal in terms of audience. Major entertainment corporations were equally restricted by their demands for formulaic work that was easily digestible by their large audiences. Neither avenue could fully accommodate the aims of the downtown cultural producers who desired both experimentation and large audiences. What they attempted to achieve was a combination of the two worlds, first with respect to production, distribution, exhibition, marketing, and celebrity.

Visual artists took on board two notable key aspects of production found in the developing worlds of alternative mass media entertainment. The first was a use of the media that new technology had made financially and technically available. Artists created television works for the newly opened cable channels both as discrete projects, like Duncan Smith’s *On the Current Symbolic Status of Oil*, and as serial productions like the Colab-based *Potato Wolf* (Moore 1982) or *Communications Update* (Katz 1980). Others turned to super-8 film, like artist David Wojnarowicz’s joint projects, *The Manhattan Love Suicides* (1985, with Richard Kern) and *Where Evil Dwells* (1986 with Tommy Turner). Wojnarowicz also made use of cassette culture through audio pieces in the cassette-based magazine *Tellus* (#5/6). The falling costs of conventional publishing made possible by developments in reproduction technology, like the photocopier, made the publication of books, magazines, flyers or posters an alternate route of art production, of which many artists like Jenny Holzer and Joe Nechvatal took advantage. (Phillips 1981)<sup>6</sup> These artists not only used reproductive technology as a means to reproduce works in other media, but also constituted the basis of the form of works themselves. In all of these examples such artists shed the single-item format of the conventional art object for the reproductive capacity of mass media. All of these formats provided the avenues by which to create multiple copies on demand. Artists were also able to return to any existent work, alter one copy, reproduce the new version, and thus create new works.

The second aspect borrowed from the mass media by artists was the use of team production. As has already been highlighted, joint efforts were integral to those works using the

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<sup>6</sup> Colab itself was described by ABC No Rio members (Moore and Miller 1985:10) as “an art and media conglomerate [with]...four basic divisions: Exhibitions, Film, Video and Publishing.” Both symbolically and practically, then, the group included all of these activities as part of a larger artistic project, facilitating the crossing of production boundaries.



media themselves, such as the films, recordings, publications and television programming. However, team production was also operative in visual works as well. Collaborative graffiti works were regularly produced that were not restricted to graffitiists themselves but also included other downtown visual artists. Organised group efforts like those by Group Material and ABC No Rio were certainly notable in relative number, if not completely commonplace. Joint and guest curating and exhibition production, was common practice; mutual support and contributions to each other's shows, benefits, fund-raisers and general decision-making was also noteworthy. Although joint efforts did occur within the institutional art world, the downtown team efforts were more flexible since artists were not constrained by contracts or circumscribed roles that required individually produced output. Furthermore, artists were not restricted by an established hierarchy, which meant that they could, and did, take on differing roles in projects, and thus could transfer their skills. Rather than collaboration based on a hierarchical ladder of ownership and expertise, then, visual artists worked across a spectrum of roles, allowing team efforts spontaneity and flexibility.

Along with these aspects of production, visual artists looked to the processes of distribution found within the mass media, again turning to alternative avenues rather than the mainstream. The ability to reproduce works in mass quantities, as with books, flyers and leaflets, or broadcast or screen in multiple places simultaneously, was another strategy to distribute works. In this respect, visual artists did not limit themselves to opening their own exhibition space but used the different media, especially television, as another means of distribution. (Moore and Miller 1985:3) Several stations sprang up, including Manhattan Cable and Soho Cable Network, running channels like ATN (Artists' Television Network), The ABC Arts Channel, and channels D and J, which all publicised artists' video work, be it through interviews, documentaries on their work, or the video projects themselves. Public stations WGBH and WNET also solicited artists' submissions, the latter screening Beth B's *Stigmata* (1991). Some channels were run by artists; some were simply hired out for short periods of time. In all cases, artists acted on their own behalf with respect to this form of distribution. The choice of exhibition venue was also a consideration for distribution. By 1980, for instance, the Mudd club was "presenting performance art and underground films in the early evening to augment the regular late-night rock concerts and disco-style dancing to the latest new wave records." (Shore 1980:84) Both television and clubs constituted avenues that provided greater opportunity to maintain "fierce control over how the work was disseminated" (Sargeant 1999:14) since the artists themselves liaised directly with the venues, often of their choosing, and organised the screening, exhibition or performance, without intermediary figures.

Importantly, these distribution choices were based on more fundamental decisions about who should have access to the work on offer. Tied in with both the desire to use television and clubs rather than galleries and to create works that were easily and cheaply distributed, was the shift in target audience from the limited spectators present at gallery exhibitions to a broader audience, both in numbers and in composition. Mass entertainment media was an obvious choice to achieve such a goal. These forms allowed accessibility that was simply not



available in a gallery where viewers often required specialised knowledge to engage with the works. Typically, artist Eugenie Diserio simultaneously praised the benefits of rock clubs and characterised the art scene as ‘insular’. (cited in Shore 1980:83) Watching television or attending a club also offered a more relaxed atmosphere than the formality of the gallery space, particularly with respect to audience engagement. *TV Party* included a ‘phone-in’ element allowing anyone watching to interact with the guests and host, often with bizarre results. (Fig. 23) Better yet for artists, these avenues could also be used for audience *inclusion*. Artists created ‘rooms’ at clubs, like Kenny Scharf’s black light room, in which any club goer could wander in and out of during the night and experience an art ‘environment’. Performances often included audience members, and even saw them “[get] up on the stage between acts to dance.” (Parnes 1985:10) As Frith and Horne (1987:128) explained: “Artists...suddenly found that they could apply their ideas in a pop club setting and get a much more *vital* response than they ever got in a gallery – even gobbing was a better response to an experimental show than polite applause.” (italics in quote) Even O’Brien aimed to achieve something similar on *TV Party*. “...I knew I wanted to base it on Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy After Dark* because he had the first talk show that was like a party and he sort of erased the distinctions between participants and the audience. We like to get the audience involved.” (Fantina 1980:9) Across the board, broad audience inclusion, be it as spectators or participants, was a serious consideration when using mass media outlets since all of these forms emphasised spectatorial engagement as part of their own production and distribution formats.

The aim to reach a broad audience was, of course, inherent in some of the media used, like television broadcasts, and so may not be considered much of a choice. However, the same considerations were taken when marketing their work. It simply was not enough to hope that people tuned in or showed up. Artists wanted to reach as many people as possible. Just as artists favoured mass media as avenues of production and distribution, so too were they favoured when advertising shows. Art magazines were not only expensive, as was highlighted in chapter 3, but they were also exclusive. The subscription base for *ARTnews*, *Art in America* or *Artforum*, hardly constituted a representation of the broader public. Newspapers, posters, leaflets and even direct mail were cheap, required little technical skill to design (hand-drawn design or simple typography were common (Fig. 24) and accessible to artists and were also already utilised within a broader public sphere. Further to print ads, artists also took an active marketing strategy, borrowing methods from other entertainment forms. Haring, for instance, handed out 10,000 leaflets and free buttons that he designed for a show at an anti-nuclear demonstration, a marketing technique, as was noted by writer Steven Hager (1986:108-110), “similar to those used by the rock industry.” In a more unusual marketing move, David McDermott hired a car and drove through the streets announcing the New Wave Vaudeville Show via megaphone. Although not exactly reliant on the newly accessible technology since it was in keeping with a Vaudeville revival theme, it did mimic the strategies of ‘criers’ standing outside theatres and circuses, touting the public for business. Artists aimed to reach a broader section of the *general* public rather than the art-going few and chose marketing methods that were both financially accessible and could reach the intended audience.



One of the most striking adoptions by artists of entertainment media's practices was that of celebrity. As has been noted, especially with respect to music, the mass media favours presence. (Cowen 1998:170; Marshall 1997:159) Rather than a relationship between audience and creator based on an appreciation of "skill and technique", a key strategy of engagement between the two is developed instead around a personal sense of immediacy and intimacy. In so doing, personas are built fundamentally around the creator by using a composition of basic characteristics set within a context that are disseminated as widely as possible. Richard Dyer (1998:63-85) advanced this perspective in his study on the star persona of Jane Fonda by the ways in which she has negotiated aspects of her own public identity (sex kitten and activist) and the contributing factors that have framed that persona, such as her family relations and her filmic roles, to build 'Jane Fonda' the star that has been offered to the public through the various media vehicles.<sup>7</sup>

Significantly, stars are not viewed so much as working members of society (in terms of their career as actors, athletes or musicians) but primarily in terms of their behaviour as individuals. "Although most stars are not dispersed, but grouped together, the evaluative orientation is not directed toward the group. It is almost always the individual and not the group, that is, the ways of acting within the community and not the community itself, which becomes the object of evaluation" (Alberoni, 1972:94). Knowledge of the star's personality is believed to provide the key to what makes that person 'unique' as well as providing a model for the assessment of other stars. However, mainstream celebrity, whilst evidently constructed, is often done so based upon what sociologist Joshua Gamson (1994:95-101) called the "semitrue", whereby facts from an actor/musician's life are reshuffled, made coherent and sometimes outrightly altered to fit into a developed persona. This method of celebrity persona development allows both fiction and reality to blend, presenting a celebrity's persona a 'natural' or realistic dimension to the audience, while at the same time providing a set of coherent 'facts' for use by publicists and the media alike. For instance, Marshall (1997:161) pointed to some of the 1960s performers who "constructed their authenticity around naturalness and the rejection of performance codes" thereby giving their fans a sense that what they were witnessing was the 'real' person.

The 'naturalness' to which Marshall refers is a key function in the ideology of celebrity. The perception that stars have risen from the ranks of the ordinary folk, along with the constant barrage of their images in the media, facilitates what Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) called 'identification-in-imagination' (65-66). Because stars are perceived as 'average Joes', they become regarded as "acquaintances, not figureheads" (Fowles, 1992:12). At the same time, however, stars also have the contradictory ideological function of maintaining social hierarchy. Stars are viewed with a fascination and awe that gives them an 'aura' not usually accorded to other acquaintances. This aura, as Abercrombie and Longhurst pointed out, could not be

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<sup>7</sup> The key point made by both Dyer and sociologist Joshua Gamson was that stardom is a process that is both textually and institutionally negotiated.



formed without a social distance between viewer and star. Celebrities are seen to possess special 'qualities', a charisma that not everyone possesses. This charisma places the star justifiably above the general public. Not only do stars deserve their increased social standing, higher incomes and phenomenal public interest because they have worked hard, but they also inherently have something 'more', something which not everyone can have.

Whilst the concept of building personas was sourced from the entertainment media, a *reflexive* construction of celebrity, including an exaggeration of the social distance and aura surrounding those personalities, was deliberately and directly used by many of those in the downtown scene. Richard Hell's admission that "[o]ne thing I wanted to bring back to rock n roll [sic] was the knowledge that you invent yourself" (cited in Lewis 1988:39) did not just apply to punk but was adopted across a wide range of downtown scene participants. Artists like Ann Magnuson and Eric Bogosian took on multiple performance personae, each one made artificially complete by dress, name and mannerisms, whilst others like Tina L'Hotsky, David McDermott and Klaus Nomi adopted personas that blended their artistic creations and their personal lives. Those works were often performance-oriented, like Tina L'Hotsky's film 'Contemporary Film History' aired on *Communications Update* based around her 1950s b-movie starlet persona. Nomi transformed the Wizard of Oz song 'Ding Dong the Witch is Dead' from a high-pitched song of glee to a campily serious aria sung in a deep amateurish operatic tone, reflecting his persona as a futuristic vampire. Celebrity personae could also be expressed through object-based work. David McDermott painted works situating them in by-gone eras that supported his turn-of-the-century 'dandy' persona or his extended life as a 1930s tenement housewife named Edith.

Unlike conventional celebrities, and in specific reaction to the hippies of the previous decade, these artists were not interested in 'naturalness.' Instead, complete artificiality was prized. Rather than referring to the model of 'normality' presented in mainstream entertainment celebrity (whose institutional modes of operation were remote anyhow) the more contextually proximate model of underground film celebrity was adopted. Through influences like Jack Smith, who was actively engaged with the downtown scene from the start (unlike Warhol), artists took on several of the underground film celebrity's characteristics. A visibly eccentric demeanour, often based on an extravagant camp sensibility, and the adoption of an unconventional name, such as Rockets Redglare (born Michael Morra) or John Sex (born John McLaughlin), were two of the most immediate appropriations. They also developed personas that specifically opposed normalcy. Not only was their dress, hair and make-up excessive and deliberately out of place, such as Sex with his massive blonde pompadour or Nomi with his white face make up and vampire cape (Fig. 25), but they often exaggerated their own neuroses, quirks and psychoses in direct contrast to the conventionally 'normal'. One striking example was a performer on *TV Party* who acted as a back-up singer dressed as a cheerleader for a cover of the Beach Boys' "Be True to Your School". When subsequently asked about her own high school years, she explained that she had been in the High School Homebound Programme and characterised it as "for crazy people". When further asked how one might participate in the



programme she said, “you just get notes from psychologists n’ stuff.” (O’Brien n.d.) Clearly, these artists, then, were not interested in becoming mainstream celebrities like Jane Fonda or Burt Reynolds, both popular at the time.

There were, of course, precedents of art stardom upon which they may have drawn. Picasso is cited by the critic Pierre Restany (1997) as the first artist to achieve star status, where interest shifts from that of “erudite and subtle historians...to biographers and chroniclers hunting for tabloid scoops and gossip” (124). Picasso became a personality whose activity, from his love life to his love of bullfighting, was the material for lifestyle columnists. Although he remained recognised as “the painter of the century,” the accolade became the justification for broader interest in his life. Restany (amongst many others) also cited Dalí as a star. Certainly Dalí was known for his open use of publicity stunts as well as his “immoderate taste for publicity, scandal and paradox” (124). The stunts themselves were not only remarked upon in the press as making other well-seasoned publicists “green with envy”, but were often engineered to establish the Dalís as visible society members rather than to simply promote Surrealist work. ‘Night in a Surrealist Forest’ was one such event intended to “establish Dalí and Gala as a socially desirable addition to West Coast society.... Clark Gable, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Ginger Rogers flew up from Hollywood. The Hitchcocks and a sprinkling of millionaires came from New York.... Dalí and Gala made their mark on California...and set off for Manhattan well satisfied with their effort” (Gibson, 1997:412). Dalí became a recognisable face marked by his signature moustache and a flamboyant personality, gracing the cover of *Time* in 1936 and was the subject of a BBC documentary in 1966. He became so widely recognised that “he found he could not cross the street without being...asked to sign autographs” (366). Both Picasso and Dalí became personas in their own right, noted in the press as much for their personality traits and their lifestyles as their work. When one endeavours to link the terms star and artist, however, the name of Andy Warhol is the most frequently discussed. Historian Patrick Smith (1986) pinpoints 1963 as the year in which Warhol dons his leather jacket and silver-sprayed wig and revamps his studio into a silver-foiled theme space (167). From this point forward, Warhol moulded his life and art into a stock set of characteristics - vacuousness, passivity, plasticity, entrepreneurship and glamour - open for all to scrutinise, from critics to the public. Importantly, Warhol extended this persona beyond the confines of the art world to the star-watching public and did so by surrounding himself with non-art world figures, such as his ‘superstar’ entourage, and by engaging in non-art world endeavours, such as films and pop music. He sought scandal and extreme reviews to spark interest in his life, allowing tabloid photographers to mill around the factory and take pictures (Tompkins, 1988:65). He produced publicity stunts that matched those for which Dalí became famous, posing one of his assistants as himself at lectures, for instance, and sending his own autographed publicity shots out to everyone who answered a survey for his gossip magazine, *Interview* (Smith, 1986:185).

Drawing an art historical connection between these examples and downtown artists would certainly be tempting. However, there is little to suggest that the former were in fact the latter’s frame of reference. The celebrity of Picasso, Dalí and Warhol were anomalous within the



art world, despite many artists being well known and even notorious. Artists, on the whole, have followed different paths to reach recognition. According to Bowness (1989), success for artists is achieved through the gaining of respect by fellow artists, scholars, and dealers and collectors. In order to gain this respect, artists must follow certain conventions such as produce work, show such work in some capacity, and lecture or give talks to live audiences. Notably, downtown artists were not interested in achieving that type of success, a type that was seen to be boring and serious and that characterised SoHo artists in particular. Instead, they worked with a concept of celebrity that was contextually proximate, that of the underground film star. In this respect, one may argue that Warhol, influenced by the earlier underground film scene himself, was the precedent for these artists. However, as previously indicated, there is little need to see Warhol as a mediator between early underground film and downtown artists since they were in direct contact with previous members of that scene. Downtown artists also took an intense interest in interim branches of underground film such as the work and stars of John Waters' films and indeed Cookie Mueller was an integral part of the downtown scene.<sup>8</sup> They also engaged directly with the contemporary underground in the punk filmmakers. Although Warhol may be placed within the development of their use of hyper-exaggerated version of the celebrity persona, he need not be pegged as the sole source of inspiration. Rather, the likes of Jack Smith, Mueller and even Divine acted as proximate models of alternative celebrity.

The point that aspects of production and distribution from the different alternative mass media forms were adopted by visual artists, of course, implies that a distinct boundary between practitioners of each medium were discernible. However, in practice, few artists stuck within the boundaries of traditional visual art media, even when using mass media strategies of say, marketing or celebrity. In fact, the categorical distinctions between 'visual' artists (i.e. sculptors, painters etc.) and filmmakers, musicians, television producers and performers became considerably more blurred, and, at times, melted away into non-existence. Basquiat, for instance, became known primarily as a painter. However, he also acted in films like *Downtown '81*, played and recorded with his 'noise' band, Gray and produced a single with fellow artist, Rammell Zee entitled "Beat Bop" (1983) for which he also did the cover artwork.<sup>9</sup> Rammell Zee himself also acted, appearing in *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) and also DJ'd in New York along with Futura 2000. Fab Five Freddy was not only a graffitist, but also worked the camera for TV Party and, after DJ-ing within the downtown scene, became the host of MTV's *Yo MTV Raps*. David Wojnarowicz, a prolific visual artist who designed posters and produced paintings and sculptures, also made films, wrote poetry, fiction and non-fiction, engaged in photographic projects, and played in a performing and recording band, Three Teens Kill 4 – No Motive.

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<sup>8</sup> Although Waters was Baltimore-based, his work was enormously influential on New York's underground film activity. Notably, in 1977, Warhol imitated Waters in the former's film *Bad* (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1983:153), which signals the degree to which sphere of influence had shifted away from Warhol to Waters.

<sup>9</sup> The collaboration for the latter, however, was not smooth running. "The song came about when Fab 5 Freddy took the Rammellzee [sic] to meet Jean-Michel Basquiat, a well known artist. Rammellzee, a graf writer, thought Basquiat was a fraud. Their conversation got heated and turned into a sort of battle. Basquiat attempted to flex his emcee talent, but Rammellzee tossed the lyrics and told partner K Rob to go off on a different level. The song eventually was released as "Beat Bop" by Rammellzee vs. K Rob." ([www.oldschoolhiphop.com/artists/emcees/krob.htm](http://www.oldschoolhiphop.com/artists/emcees/krob.htm))



Charlie Ahearn produced sculptures whilst also making the noted film *Wild Style* (1982). Even filmmaker Beth B branched into poster design and multimedia installation along with acting, music videos and newspaper writing. (Sargeant 1999:17,24)

These projects were not, at the time, generally viewed as 'sideline' projects, with one form taking precedence. Artists worked in many media simultaneously, not distinguishing between practice in one medium and practice in another. Indeed, the merging of practices between art and entertainment positively enabled the multidirectional activity of these artists. Further, many projects were situated in the interface between art and an entertainment mass media product. Certainly TV programmes such as *TV Party* and *Communications Update* were just a few of those. Neither project was simply a broadcast of artists' videos but was a created work based on a mainstream television format. Performance, too, was manifestly evident in the kitschy stage shows of early Blondie, the B52s and Klaus Nomi, all of whom included props and theatrical costumes, and in the aggressive bodily contortions of James Chance and his attacks on the audience.

The fact that many of these artists and projects remained partially within an art context suggests that they were not full-scale entertainment products. Indeed, as was the case with the models of celebrity, they did not match several key mass entertainment criteria. Despite similarities in certain production and distribution practices, they were not operating (and, without changes, could not operate) within the mainstream as it existed at that point in time. For one thing, downtown cultural producers, be they in music, film, television or the visual arts, did not adhere to accessible conventions. As Noel Carroll (1998:193) has highlighted in his study of mass art, conventions that are easily recognisable by the audience are a necessary condition for broad product appeal. The attempt to engage a broad spectrum of viewers "is a matter of...building and reinforcing audience expectations by means of repetition and formula." In other words, the less specialised knowledge an audience needs to engage with the product, the greater the potential audience. Downtown cultural producers, however, were interested in experimentation with conventions, often mounting an overall challenge to art world conventions, most often understood only by those already familiar with previous art products. For instance, the strategy of mixing styles seemed to stem from previous underground film practices than from popular filmic depictions of characters, times and places. Sixties filmmaker George Kuchar (cited in Sargeant 1999:10) advised: "Never dress your stars in current fashion mode. Always mix styles in reckless abandon...." A practice not widely used within mainstream film, these conventions would have been unfamiliar to most viewers. As actor Cookie Mueller (in Walker 1981:41) explained, "When someone asks me what 'underground' is – usually I can't say – but obviously it's not accessible. That is – you have to 'know' where the door is."

Work drawing on underground film, then, inclined artists to adopt conventions outside the mainstream. As a result, audiences were different to the broader range of consumers of mainstream Hollywood productions or chart-topping pop hits. Since familiarity with both the conventions and the objectives of downtown artwork were a factor in their consumption,



audiences and spectators were generally drawn from within their own community. Critic Charles Tarzian (1985:109-110) makes this point in his discussion the performance club 8BC when he characterised the spectators as “an audience of peers...Here, then, is the new vaudeville, different from its predecessor in that it is a largely local phenomenon, but vaudeville nonetheless....” So, unlike the earlier travelling vaudeville shows, that wee once hugely popular with audiences across the United States, productions from downtown artists remained largely restricted to the local artistic community itself. The New Cinema, for instance, was unable to attract outside viewers to attend and so had to close down within months of opening. Indeed, Walter Robinson (2002) stated with respect to the A. More Store, “Tom Otterness always wanted to have it out of the art world and have it be a non-art-world-based thing but I don’t think we were ever able to do that.” Clubs certainly did provide access to larger, non-art audiences, however, attendees were in a position to engage with or ignore the work on offer. Moreover, they would have been relatively local community members. These venues did not constitute access to national or international markets.

Of course, to reach those broader audiences, downtown cultural producers could have tried to integrate into the mainstream industries, and some did so successfully. But most remained at the fringes of corporate avenues of production and distribution. Again, this state of affairs was difficult to overcome given artists’ interests in working outside mainstream conventions. Eric Mitchell, in an interview (Kohlhofer 1979:8), noted the difficulty when working with either video or super-8 format since most distribution channels minimally required 16mm. Television required scripting and rehearsing, and television corporations demanded creative control over production, taking it out of the hands of artists. Shows like *Potato Wolf* and *TV Party*, if they survived at all, would have changed drastically in a mainstream production context. The do-it yourself mode of production was simply at odds with mainstream role specialisation. Of course, the most serious obstacle between downtown cultural productions and mainstream entertainment industries was content. Like John Waters’ “aesthetic of bad taste: a celebration of everything that isn’t family entertainment...” (Sargeant 1999:11), downtown artists frequently relied upon content designed to shock and appal, which presented bleak scenarios or outrageously camp trash. Generally their aim was to offend the staid, conservative sensibility of both the art and corporate worlds by producing work that was both bleak and brash. The cartoon imagery of Kenny Scharf may be childish, but nightmarishly so. Few parents would opt for *Jungle Jism* (Fig. 26) in their child’s nursery over Winnie the Pooh. Their emphasis upon offending mainstream sensibilities and values thus compromised their aim to access conventional channels of production and distribution that sought precisely to minimise such offence.

### III

The deliberate avoidance of certain crucial mainstream production and distribution features by downtown cultural producers brings us to the key issue of agency. Outlined previously was the importance of structural context of the downtown artists with respect to



entertainment mass media. However, as previously discussed with respect to entrepreneurialism, the interaction between artistic production and entertainment practices outlined here suggests that their complementarity broadened artistic opportunities.

This element of agential enablement, rather than structural determination, becomes particularly apparent once the other choices open to these artists are highlighted. First, artists could have simply adopted the art world practices already in place. Indeed, as eventually transpired in the East Village in particular, artists could have set about forming an alternative version or extension of SoHo, complete with dealers and conventional galleries. In addition, they could have courted collectors through the same art world channels used by the alternative spaces of the 1970s, which continued to use catalogues, art publications and academic institutions for recognition. Certain ambitions, however, made this option less desirable. They were interested in accessing a more popular segment of the public than was obtainable through the art world. Although pursuing interests different to much of the mainstream entertainment business, Moore and Miller (1985:7) pointed out, with respect to artists like themselves, that “these arts groups sought to make ethnic culture, political analysis, and ideas about social justice fashionable components of the mainstream.” Not all artists were so directly politically motivated in their content; however, the objective remained to take their artistic vision into a broader public realm. Beth B’s film, *Stigmata* (1991), for instance, was aired on the television station WNET where they estimated it had a viewership of 2.5 million. (Sargeant 1999:23) Like many in the downtown scene, she strove to take her work further than the reaches of art institutions and recognised that the mass media avenues provided the best opportunity: “I mean where else am I going to get that kind of audience...?” In addition, they recognised that the confines of the art world conflicted with their ambitions. Aside from the constantly articulated complaint that SoHo was simply ‘full’ and not able to accommodate the large numbers of new artists who were working in completely different ways to those already established there, many realised as well that much of the general public viewed the art world with suspicion. David Byrne (cited in Shore 1980:79) discussed the crossovers between his band’s work and art but hastily added: “I hate to put any kind of label on it. Using the word ‘art’ tends to scare people off.”

At this point, one could argue that since access to conventional art world avenues were limited for these artists, little agency was involved on their part. Statements of art world disavowal were merely rationalisations rather than a motivation for action. Consequently, it may be claimed that the use of such practices by artists was determined by the broader shift in capitalist production from an industrial base in manufacturing to a service-based economy. The socio-economic use of celebrity within their practice may indicate such a determination. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998:86) interpreted this drive toward constant engagement with the star as part of a larger transformation in post-industrial capitalism from a consumer economy based upon goods to one based upon services. They argued, “the...audience is becoming a market for cultural goods, while markets only work because consumers (and producers too) are increasingly treated as members of an audience. Indeed, in an aestheticized and commodified society, consuming is like being a member of a diffused audience because both involve



*performance*" (97, italics in text). Along these lines, the increased attention paid by downtown artists to entertainment forms and modes of exhibition could be interpreted by art historians, in a downward conflationary manner, as simply determined in the last instance by the imperatives of post-Fordist capitalism.

However, what such an account overlooks is the agential latitude with respect to these developments. Significantly, growth of leisure and services encompassed more than just the growth in the retail or entertainment industry. The mammoth burgeoning of educational services was also apparent, and given art production's increasingly integral link with degree-granting institutions, artists may have opted to tap into this development that offered more security financially and in terms of infrastructural support. Some downtown artists did so to a partial extent, with the integration of community service functions into art centres such as Fashion Moda and ABC No Rio. Yet, the limited educational activity that did exist did not develop into a large-scale practice amongst downtown artists, neither did it stem from nor feed into established educational institutions that directly benefited from service sector growth. Part of the reason for this may have been the varied backgrounds of the scene's participants, some of whom did not have any links or even experience with these institutions. In this respect, several key players of the scene did not have immediate access to these avenues. Nonetheless, many did, and yet, at least initially, opted for other routes. Again, one reason for the avoidance of an art career pursued through educational institutions was that the same restrictions on audience make-up applied here as they did in the privately-financed art world. Furthermore, many of the SoHo-based art movements so reviled by downtown artists, including Minimalism and Conceptualism, were favoured by academics within the burgeoning post-secondary educational system. As will be further explored in chapter 6, these artists consciously rejected the values and positions that were affiliated with academic institutions.

Another viable option, aside from accessing the art world through educational means, was to enter into the mainstream entertainment industry. There is little doubt that downtown artists were interested in reaching broader audiences than were on offer via the art world. However, as previously argued, they flouted those practices that would have made their work fit into the conventions of those industries. Walter Steding (cited in Shore:83) described one of his performances: "I did an 8-minute, very noisy performance with my violin and a handmade synthesizer and I wore this strange costume with wraparound sunglasses with strobe lights embedded in them. And the crowd applauded and shouted afterwards. I was stunned!" Steding's comments indicate his awareness that his performance transgressed the conventions of mainstream entertainment, and furthermore, showed surprise that an audience would like such a show. Nonetheless, this audience was undoubtedly small in comparison to those of mainstream performers, and by giving such an unconventional performance he challenged mainstream culture *and* the industries that sustain it. Not only did downtown cultural producers not court mainstream audiences, despite wanting a broader appeal than art culture, they also wished to maintain control over their own production and distribution, control that was not possible within the institutional constraints of mass entertainment industries. Thus, they actively



sought a middle ground between art and entertainment, not as many cultural producers do by relinquishing some aspect of control over their work, but as a novel combination of production and distribution practices. As I will return to shortly, this combination was problematic given the contradictory imperatives of the avant-garde and the mainstream.

One other factor has been highlighted as an instance of structural determination. Often raised with respect to both punk music and underground film, technology is frequently cited as a key determinant. Both Negus (1995) and Hoberman (1981) place technology at the heart of these artists' overall project. Negus (1995:336) writes, "technological changes have continually created the conditions for new creative practices and aesthetic sensibilities." Although neither writer *claims* outright technological determinism, the suggestion remains that technological developments have acted as a sufficient condition for the existence of these forms. The implication, of course, is that these movements only began once the technology became available, and given the interconnection of visual artists with both punk and underground film, technology equally influenced downtown art practices. Certainly technology was a significant element of the context in which they worked. As McCaffery (1990:4) pointed out, "music, television, video art, and the cinema have all increasingly incorporated the new electronic technologies into their very modes of production, distribution, and exhibition." However, downtown practitioners did not solely use entertainment conventions from forms significantly reliant on technology. They also drew upon theatrical forms such as vaudeville and cabaret, which gave birth to the New Wave Vaudeville Show in 1979. There was also stand-up comedy, which included the *Taxi Cabaret* by Rockets Redglare, Steve Buscemi and Mark Boone Jr. Plays and theatrical performance pieces were also frequently staged, such as those by Ann Magnuson, Ethel Eichelberger and John Sex. As with the other forms discussed previously, these works mediated between art world 'performance' with its intellectual intensity and silent spectators, and Broadway productions with their broad appeal, particularly commercial forms like 'travelling shows' that facilitated wider audience participation, and allowed for repeat performances. If there had been significant technological developments in stage production, little reference to its impact can be found in the literature on the period. Shows were sustained on meagre budgets with few technological bells and whistles. Props were often made from cardboard. So, whilst the availability of new technological means of production and distribution no doubt played an essential role in the ability of artists to adopt entertainment practices, the notion that they were exclusively determined the context in which they worked is unwarranted. The use entertainment practices by these artists was neither structurally determined by post-Fordist capitalism nor technological developments. They recognised their choice to do so and consciously assessed their proximate and complementary alternatives. They actively sought out those practices in lieu of opportunities situated within the educational institution.

#### IV

I have argued that the practices with which downtown artists engaged were not mainstream but alternative, a term that may imply that these practices were indeed subversive.



If I were to advance such a claim, I would, at least critically speaking, be in the minority. The perception from many critical quarters was that artists' involvement with entertainment practices was indicative of a wider encroachment of capitalism into the 'avant-garde'. Indeed, by the late 1970s, the avant-garde was unsurprisingly deemed to be dead. Instead, a new form of money-seeking artist, and capital-accruing object, was believed to have risen. From this perspective, the avant-garde dialectic of opposition did not seem to inform these downtown practices since they were seen by many as the commercial posturing as avant-garde.

Significantly, the critical debates of the period concerning the politics of avant-garde work coincided with a shift in the relationship between high art and commercial culture. As outlined in the introduction, fear over the commercialization of high art became distinctly audible with the arrival of Pop Art and a buoyant art economy, especially with published texts such as Huntington Hartford's book *Art or Anarchy?: How the Extremists and Exploiters Have Reduced the Fine Arts to Chaos and Commercialism* in 1964. Rather than claiming that the proximity of the two was simply groundless scare-mongering, it would seem that what motivated these fears was a very real weakening of the traditional American cultural élite, a relationship that had endured since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (DiMaggio 1986b; Levine 1988) A key reason for this was undoubtedly the expansion of post-secondary education as well as the increased accessibility of high art to the middle classes by the increase in means of transportation. In their aspirations to climb the social ladder, the middle classes could not only now go and see these canonised works (for which it had always been argued that appreciation could only be obtained first hand) but they could critically discuss them as well. Such activity was accessible to those whose economic and educational training had once been previously limited.

The middle classes, though, did not simply absorb upper class culture. They also integrated it into their own more commercially-based forms of valued culture. An excellent example of this process may be seen in the monumental changes that took place within the advertising industry beginning in the late 1950s. Thomas Frank (1997) has outlined a transformation in advertising from a culture dominated by flannel-suited businessmen whose formulaic advertising campaigns were dictated solely by client wishes to one in which the designers of campaigns were given control over the final product. 'Creativity' and 'artistry' then, became integral concepts in the development of the lowbrow art of design and advertising. For those wishing to maintain the distinction, such mixing of artistry and commercialism was seen by some not only to demean the value of creativity but also to degrade the entire project of disinterested enlightenment through art. Others viewed commercialism as a corrupting force that compromised the ability of a truly oppositional practice. Both charges were levelled against downtown artists.

It seems likely, as well, that the increased synergy between different entertainment industries from the late 1970s onwards meant that they were better able to accommodate multi-focus artists as the 1980s wore on. Certainly, as film historian Stephen Prince (2000) has discussed, the film industry itself shifted "from film...toward filmed entertainment" beginning with



Paramount who “anticipated the mutually reinforcing entertainment synergies (movies, books, music, television programming, home video, cable, and theatrical exhibition) that would be so important throughout the decade and guide the industry’s development.” (xii,13-14) Although practically these mergers were partly done to “spread their risk”, they also used these connections to “enhance their distribution,” pushing the same core product in various manifestations through the different media channels. (Wolf 1999:25; Prince 2000:133) Even when the boundaries were not formally erased via mergers, a general relaxation of boundaries affected different media players who sought to minimally collaborate with others. Multi-focus artists then, like Ann Magnuson<sup>10</sup>, were able to carry that market value of their name as they crossed media boundaries. Other examples include Robert Longo, who directed music videos by New Order and R.E.M and eventually directed the film *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995) produced by TriStar and Alliance. Cindy Sherman, often valorised as one whose work seriously challenges media representation through her ‘avant-garde’ photographs, has also simultaneously worked in fashion for the likes of Dianne B, Comme Des Garçons and Issey Miyake, and in film with her project *Office Killer* 1997, produced by big name indie film producer Christine Vachon.

Furthermore, the entertainment industries, although never completely ignoring niche markets, increasingly engaged in producing specialised target-audience projects. Klaus Nomi, for instance, was never going to compete in popularity with Kenny Rogers, Kim Carnes or Hall and Oates, all of whom had number one hits in 1981.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, his successful appearance on *Saturday Night Live* on the 15<sup>th</sup> December 1979 with cohort Joey Arias as backing vocalists for the singer David Bowie, prompted French RCA to offer a record contract soon afterward. Likewise, the band formed from Club 57’s Ladies Auxiliary, Pulsallama, was invited to tour with the Clash and released two singles. Neither act, however, was intended for broad public consumption. Pulsallama’s singles, “The Devil Lives in My Husband’s Body” and “Pulsallama on the Rag”, were just too outlandish for most American consumers. As one member, Dany Johnson, recognised: “After we got a look at ourselves on cable TV we realized, yes, we were a clown show.” (cited in Hager 1986:120)

Unquestionably, downtown practices might be dismissed as a challenge to systems of power had they simply been absorbed by mainstream entertainment institutions or those of the art world. There can be little doubt that the relationship of artists to aspects of the entertainment industry helped to broaden their popularity and public profile. Punk/No Wave and New Wave gained entry into the general public consciousness early on with “homegrown” bands like the Talking Heads, Blondie, and the Ramones, and helped carry other artists, including filmmakers as well as visual artists, with it. (Frank and McKenzie 1987:12) Director Eric Mitchell (Kohlhofer 1980:10) explained this connection: “I see everybody latching onto the rock scene because of

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<sup>10</sup> She has not only acted in Hollywood films (*Desperately Seeking Susan* 1985; *Clear and Present Danger* 1994; *Panic Room* 2002) and in television (*Vandemonium Plus* 1987), but continued with her music career first as a member of Pulsallama and later, Bongwater.

<sup>11</sup> It must be noted, however, that the downtown retro punk band, Blondie, went to number one twice that year with ‘The Tide is High’ and ‘Rapture’, indicating a level of commercialisation for which they were criticised, not least by their downtown peers. For a list of 1981 chartoppers, see [www.80sexchange.com/80s\\_charts/1981.htm](http://www.80sexchange.com/80s_charts/1981.htm). [19th June 2003].



the press; the rock press is much stronger than the film press at this point. they [sic] feel that if they make a movie in the rock context they'll get press instantly." Pearlman (1997:225) made a similar case with regard to graffiti. "[I]t is possible that the artists' promotion of graffiti culture would never have succeeded had it not been for the dramatic commercial success of rap music." By the mid-1980s, MTV broadened the awareness of other 'indie' cultural producers as well as indie music itself by showcasing the work of Beth B, as well as airing videos like "Rapture" and "Atomic" by Blondie that included visual and lyrical references to artists and their work. (Hesmondhalgh 1999:48; Sargeant 1999:18) Furthermore, they were aware of the benefits and actively pursued those avenues. Jonathan Buchsbaum (1981:44) wrote that "the new filmmakers reject the avant garde's complacent alienation from the movie marketplace" Laurie Anderson saw music as more accessible than galleries for the consumption of unconventional artistic products like her own (*East Village Eye* 1980:6).

However, the characterisation of these artists as being comfortably integrated into mainstream entertainment channels is not an accurate one. As has already been discussed, neither the personae of the cultural producers/artists nor their works fit into the conventions of most entertainment products. But even from historical and institutional perspectives, many crossover attempts by industry, even when marketed as niche products, were unsuccessful. Nomi and Pulsallama, for instance, were flops. The highly sophisticated synergies that were in place by the 1990s were unevenly developed in the late 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Consequently the role of mainstream entertainment corporations in downtown New York was patchy at best, even if their talent scouts did have their eye on its activity. Indeed the main feature of these crossovers was, as has been with respect to 'indie' music' (Hesmondhalgh 1999:37), the increased independence of artists through ownership and control of their means of production and distribution, enabling a more "effective route toward democratisation" of the art world. Of course, to describe this process as 'subversive' would not be wholly accurate; after all, the term is too loaded and usually implies an ability to undermine power relations. Yet, by directly engaging with the media forms and altering their production to reach new, or at least broadened, audiences, downtown artists did challenge existing art world power relations. Indeed, their capacity to exert agential control over their own production and distribution was compromised not by such engagement but by the reintegration of these cultural producers into traditional avenues of cultural production and distribution that occurred in the early to mid 1980s. Musicians moved into the music industry and filmmakers were attracted to the more mainstream American independent film circuit.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, artists began to produce art for dealers and collectors though the newly formed art world of the East Village.

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, Prince (2000:18-19) explained that "at the top of the decade [the 1980s] many of the major film studios operated as part of a traditionally conglomerated corporate sector that included key, interrelated components...as well as unrelated operations...By the decade's end, this diffuse structure of business activities had been replaced by a tight focus on entertainment and communications operations in which theatrical film was a small but vital component."

<sup>13</sup> The Bs, for instance, had begun this transition by 1983 with their film *Vortex* released that year. According to Sargeant (1999:16-17) the budget was a relatively massive \$70,000 made up of grants and money from independent backers and premiered at the New York Film Festival, thus moving them "into the zone of the independent American Film."



Within in the East Village itself, the initial galleries were anomalous, conceived as part gallery part social space. However, they rapidly became part of a wider *art* system as new galleries sprung up across Alphabet City. Robinson and McCormick (1984:135) even describe this new art district when referring to its galleries, its special 'day' when collectors could wander around at will, and its notable 'styles'. Those working in visual media in downtown New York, as a result, became 'Artists' in the traditional sense of painters and sculptors, losing their more ambiguous role that is better captured by the term 'cultural producers'. Dealers began scouting clubs, taking artists' work out of those environments, and putting them into a gallery setting. Frank and McKenzie (1987:65) make particular reference to the appearance of the likes of Mary Boone, Tony Shafrazi, Anina Nosei and Gracie Mansion at the Mudd club, all of whom went on to represent many of those downtown artists who became most well-known. Once implanted in the gallery system, artists were obligated to collectors rather than audience members at a club and restricted by dealers' marketing and exhibition choices rather than their own. In so doing, they moved away from this experimental community of mutual support and minimized their novel integration of practices.

Part of the problem for all of the various cultural producers within the downtown scene was their desire to reach to a broader audience, and consequently, to become 'popular'. Hesmondhalgh (1999:57) has argued with respect to punk that, "[i]t proved impossible to reconcile being 'outside' the music industry with producing a new mainstream, because the terms of that new attempt were dictated by the capitalist economics which make the majors dominant." Downtown artists found themselves in a similar contradictory situation, one that exemplifies the social configuration of a necessary contradiction with its situational logic of compromise. As they aspired to greater recognition, they increasingly moved into traditional art institutional systems that were already operating within a set of established power relations. However, any attempt to circumvent that system would have also limited the type and nature of their popularity. Consequently, the desire to broaden their audience appeal while maintaining their outsider status was difficult to reconcile. Richard Hell (quoted in Hager 1986:11) expressed this contradiction best when discussing his seminal punk song "Blank Generation": "It was an assertion of the formless, inarticulate anger of ignored youth...I also wanted to get rich and get laid."

Despite these contradictions, I view both the entrepreneurial practices described in the last chapter, and the entertainment strategies discussed here, as exerting a positive influence on power relations within the art world. Those practices, once adopted by the broad downtown community, never really disappeared, even as the community broke up and returned to more traditional art world tendencies. For instance, the 1990s saw a slew of artists' films such as those by Sherman and Longo as well as a recent animated special by Scharf for the Cartoon Network, *The Groovenians* (2002), which, again, continued the same collaborative effort by various downtown players. The examples of artists' projects that have taken place from the 1980s onwards are testament to the fact that artists by accessing avenues different to those offered in the art world can achieve greater independence over the production and distribution



and even the form of their work. As we will now see, control over production and distribution was not merely an economic issue; it was also political.



## Chapter 5

### “It’s Morning in America”: Investigating the Impact of Macro-Political Change<sup>1</sup>

The image of Mark Kostabi posing as a character he called St. Market (Fig. 19) represents the primary way in which the artists involved with the Downtown art scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s have been understood - that is, in terms of money, greed and neo-conservatism. Indeed, the portrayal of the entire artistic community working at that time is one of hardheaded capitalism at work driven by the flourishing neo-conservative values, summarily represented by the election of Reagan.

Few writers made a direct link between the presidency of Ronald Reagan and these artists. Many articles that were fundamental in the formation of such a lasting conception of the era made a more general claim about the relationship between the economic turn to the right and the constitution of the downtown art scene. The most notable article in this respect was Craig Owens’ (1984) challenge in *Art in America* to a lengthy description of the East Village scene by two of its avid supporters, Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormack. In his short critique entitled “The Problem with Puerilism”, Owens focused upon the commercialisation and marketing of subcultural practices within the scene, criticising their reliance on “[t]he culture industry’s artificial, mass-produced, generic signifiers for ‘Difference’” (163). Hal Foster also reinforced this capitalist image through several articles published throughout the early 1980s. His article “Between Modernism and the Media” (1985), originally published in the summer of 1982, stood out in particular in terms of its direct attack on key practices and players of the downtown art scene. Like Owens’ piece, Foster focused upon the subcultural practice of graffiti in his lengthier critique, also printed in *Art in America*. He equally criticised the co-option of these practices by media-savvy artists such as Keith Haring and the “new art world primitive/prodigy” Jean-Michel Basquiat. (49) Both critics tied these artists to the political neo-conservatism of the time through their “uncovering” of the relationship between capitalism in its contemporary form (in Foster’s case through the use of Jameson’s theorisation of post-industrial capitalism) and downtown art and artists. Indeed, Foster rhetorically asked, “But what if this art signals an alienation from history and not a return to it – an acceptance of the cultural division of labor (of the marginal role of the artist as romantic entertainer, purveyor of prestige goods) and a legitimization of social subjection and authoritarian tendencies in the present?” (35) Given the timing and context of these words written in an American publication a year after the presidential election, Foster was arguing that this work provided legitimization for the entrenchment of exploitative capitalist practices *as well as* the reaffirmation of the values and ruling position of the Reagan administration. In other words, the work of these artists (or even the artists themselves) was both economically and politically conservative since it was neo-conservative political ideology that underpinned such an economic swing to the right.

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<sup>1</sup> The title, of course, derives from Ronald Reagan’s 1984 campaign slogan.



A few articles did indeed make a direct connection between the state and the art scene. "The Fine Art of Gentrification", this time published in *October*, focused on the role of the East Village artists in the gentrification of the Lower East Side. Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan directly accused the artists of operating with a right-wing agenda. Not only do they liken the enthusiasm for the scene by the likes of McCormack and Robinson to Reaganite campaign spin which systematically ignored social realities, they went so far as to draw damning parallels between the scene's participants and the Zionists at the turn of the century. (1987:153,163) Lucy Lippard (1979:8) went one step further to slyly suggest that the "new wave" artists might have been so conservative as to be "fascist".<sup>2</sup> Martha Rosler (1998) also argued in her *Afterimage* article that a direct relationship existed between the 'conservatism' visible in contemporary artistic practice and the shift in attitude toward the arts by the Reagan administration. "The populist orientation of the Carter NEA has been discarded by the pseudopopulist Reagan administration, which is in this as in other policies intent on reestablishing the material sign and benefits of great wealth – in this case, an elite, restricted cultural practice...Artists are as sensitive as anyone to changes in wind direction and as likely to adjust to them." (97) Although not mentioning the East Village artists by name, she specifically saw the contemporary scene in 1982 as conservative, and looked to the future for political progressive, "socially-engaged, and egalitarian art." (101)

The unmistakable assumption in all of these articles was that the art scene flourishing in downtown Manhattan at the time could only have been possible during the Reagan era. In the case of the Owens, Foster and Rosler articles, the connection was tied in with their frameworks of explanation. All relied on a downward conflationary framework in which socio-political structures determined the resultant production. Owens, for instance, explained that "[t]he prevalence of subcultural models in contemporary avant-garde production...documents the importance subcultural appropriation in the maintenance of a global cultural economy" (162) In other words, the shaping forces of the downtown arts scene were larger social processes. For all three, though, it was particularly the ideology of the neo-conservatives that shaped downtown art. These artists and works were merely a manifestation of greater hegemonic forces, and whilst artists may have argued for freedom and individualism, these concepts were part of a dominant ideology designed to give the illusion of autonomy.<sup>3</sup> Deutsche and Ryan, however, took an upward conflation approach that the downtown artists of the East Village were in full agential control of their neo-conservative stance. These artists were not structurally 'shaped' into their conservative position but were, rather, active proponents of Reaganite beliefs. As a result, the two authors felt the art world members within the East Village should be held directly accountable for the displacement of the neighborhoods more marginalised residents. Lippard (1979:9), too, argued that artists could and should claim responsibility for the

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<sup>2</sup> She argued that, "[e]ven the most convinced formalist, minimalist or postwhatsis, should know what s/he really means on some fundamental level. And, if what s/he means is fundamentally fascist, I'd like to see this recognized, questioned, and rejected by the art audience."



meanings generated by their images (but did not) and felt that they were, minimally, “feeding neatly into the right wing’s fury and...playing agent provocateur to the working classes....” In other words, they were in control of their work even though they might have denied it.

It stood to reason then, for all the authors mentioned, that if neo-conservatism was the dominant political and ideological framework of the time, and this work rose to prominence at that historical moment, then the two must be linked. In fact, although the negative critical attitudes expressed by these critics toward downtown artists were not widely shared, their assumptions about the direct connection between the neo-conservative tide and the rise of these artists to prominence were not anomalous. Such was the force of such a connection that little historical investigation was deemed to be necessary. Aspects of the downtown arts scene such as object production and entrepreneurialism were often cited as the ultimate ‘proof’ that they were borne out of the Reagan revolution. Even their own supporters were persuaded of this. McCormack and Robinson infamously wrote that “[t]he East Village art scene, incidentally, suits the Reaganite zeitgeist remarkably well; its private, economic entrepreneurship coincides so closely with Reagan administration attitudes that one almost expects to hear a reference to the new art scene in a presidential anecdote.” (137)

However, there is good reason to believe that they were not neo-conservative agents nor were they involved with any of the political concerns of the neo-conservative movement, their entrepreneurial activity notwithstanding. After all, many leftists and liberals engage in entrepreneurial activity, despite its popular association with hard-core Republicanism. And, it was precisely the simple equation of the two that led to the common conflation between the downtown artists and neo-conservatism. What becomes evident through an investigation of the political context and an examination of works produced in that context, however, is that this group of artists was mired in the chaos, confusion and disillusionment intertwined with the decline of the Democratic party after 1968 and not with the rise of neo-conservatism whose roots and development gave rise to different political agendas for its supporters. What a morphogenetic approach will reveal are the similarities between the ideological dynamic of the broad spectrum of liberal and leftist political positions under the Democratic umbrella and the interconnected communities that constituted the downtown arts scene. This dynamic is best characterised with reference to Margaret Archer’s concept of pluralism, in which the contingent contradictions inherent in a given political framework are prised apart by specific groups within it who seek to accentuate the differences in their standpoints.

To reach this understanding, I will split my investigation into two sections. In the first part, I examine changes in state policy with regard to the arts to indicate that the Reagan administration mandate did not in fact benefit the downtown arts scene. I will then turn to developments within both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party, including its liberal and left wing, to reveal that the ideological dynamic of the latter bears greater similarity to the

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<sup>3</sup> Although this was the critics’ explicit approach, one could sense equal contempt for the artists themselves. This contempt hinted that in contradiction to these critics’ post-structural frameworks lay the belief that these artists did



politics of downtown artists and their works. Furthermore, I will argue that artists' direct engagement in political activity is better understood as specific attempts to circumvent both state and corporate control over their art production and distribution. The conclusion reached, then, will be that to characterise these artists as neo-conservative is inaccurate, and that part of the reason for such a misunderstanding was due, in part, to the fragmentation of the liberal/leftist coalition.

I

As many scholars have revealed, art has often played a key role in the development and implementation of state policy. For instance, duty and taxes on the importation of art from abroad was at the centre of a debate spanning more than 30 years over free trade versus protectionism and taxing the wealthy on items of luxury since after the Civil War, taxes on such items skyrocketed. For those working within the arts, these debates were nothing less than “a litmus test of the government’s posture toward the nation’s cultural life.” (Barber 1999a:210) The 1930s, too, saw policy over the arts shift to one of unprecedented federal support as the Roosevelt administration developed new roles for the government within public life. The role of art also shifted from one of luxury to one of public service as artists were contracted to produce works for federal buildings and public spaces. (Barber 1999b) The 1950s saw a different political use of art as the cold war developed. Art was no longer viewed as a collective good but rather as a symbol of American freedom and individualism, intended to counter the Soviet forms of social realism that emphasised collective labour. As Serge Guilbaut (1983) revealed in his landmark book, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, international exhibitions were used by the American government to promote its own ideological interests and in an effort to counter the ‘spread’ of communism.<sup>4</sup> A decade later, as politicians warmed once again to the idea of federal funding for the arts after nearly a 25-year absence, legislation was submitted for the formation of state (New York State Council on the Arts) and federal (National Endowment for the Arts) agencies, formed in 1960 and 1965 respectively, in a bid to support the arts. As Zukin (1989:100-110) highlighted, the funding was rationalised not as “as an instrument of economic recovery” as it was in the 1930s, but rather as a means to improve the “quality of life.” More strategically, it served as “good news” for politicians to deliver to their constituents. In the longer term, it also served both in the development of national prestige and the co-ordination of business and the state.

Arts budgets continued to increase throughout the 1970s (DiMaggio 1986a:82-83), but subtle shifts in the allocation of public subsidies began to take effect. Historian John Morton Blum (1991:480-81) placed the turning point for the *positive* use of government on a broad scale, in other words for the generation and maintenance of social programs, at 1974, the year Nixon began to plan for his second term in office. The assault on arts funding, however, took

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have political choices, the freedom to exercise them, and ultimately made the *wrong* choices.

<sup>4</sup> See also Hills (1993:152-159) who criticised Guilbaut for restraining his analysis, which avoided directly linking artists to such ideological exercises, calling them ‘coincidences’ instead. Hills made the direct link through an analysis of the work of Alfred H. Barr Jr.’s writings.



effect with the installation of the Reagan administration in 1981. Although some concern was expressed over Reagan's pre-election 'promises', few expected such forceful implementation of the neo-conservative policy. DiMaggio and Useem, for instance, writing in 1978, predicted little change in the status quo of funding allocation, despite applauding greater allocation of NEA funding for non-traditional arts. (381-389) Their primary concern in the article was funding distribution, not cuts to the existing arts budget. Eight years later, DiMaggio (1986a) focused instead on the reality of changes in arts funding, particularly with reference to the shift in emphasis that took place in the 1980s.

The first shock was Reagan's proposed Economic Recovery Plan that threatened recipients of public funding in four ways. First, and seemingly the most serious, was the proposal to decrease the budget of government agencies, like the NEA, by 50 percent. This reduction was a startling reversal for those who were accustomed to programme expansion, as had been the case over the previous two decades. Second was the proposal to decrease the income tax of the wealthiest Americans from 70 percent to 50. Given that arts support through gifts and donations provided a tax shelter for those in this income bracket, the decrease made giving less appealing and thus would affect the number of donations made. Third, cuts across the board, including other publicly funded programs meant that the competition for alternative funds both from private foundations and individual patrons was intensified. And finally, decreases in federal funds could trigger a reduction in state funds since state (and even local) governments may choose to shift some of their public monies to programs that previously had federal funding, or may even simply follow the lead of the federal government by cutting their own budgets. (DiMaggio 1986a:66-67)

A second shock came with the appointment of Frank Hodsoll, a white house careerist and lawyer, to the position of NEA chairman in November 1981 since he openly expressed his sympathy with Reagan's political and economic agenda. According to Wu (2002:70-78), Hodsoll immediately made his political presence felt within the organisation through his direct involvement in the decision making process. Unlike the previous chairs, Hodsoll did not necessarily go with the majority verdict, often times going against what was otherwise a unanimous vote. He also appointed colleagues sympathetic with his desire to shrink the NEA's role as a direct sponsor of the arts and introduce more business involvement. For instance, one of Hodsoll's first projects was to set up a new government office in 1982 focusing on "Private Partnership." The same ideological belief in greater market and less government involvement in the arts was behind his serious consideration of John Beardsley's report recommendation that the government act as a facilitator in joining art criticism and the private sector rather than as a source of funding itself, after suspending the Art Critics Fellowship in 1981. What is key to note here is that Hodsoll was not simply withdrawing funds; he was reorganising the political institutions by which the arts were funded, shifting the role of government from direct sponsor to an intermediary fundraiser. (51)



Although hardly good news, the broad scale consequences were not as bad as it first appeared. Funds reached their peak at \$220 million in 1982, slowly settling back down to \$170 million by 1990 rather than the huge drop in budget figures predicted. (Martorella 1990:11) Congress refused to approve the 50 percent cut, allowing a 10 percent cut instead. (DiMaggio 1986a:80, Gever 1984:3) In addition, much of the money lost in cuts to the NEA was compensated by a growth in state and municipal funding. (DiMaggio 1986a:80-81, O'Hagan 1998:11) For example, an article in *Afterimage* (Trend, 1984:4,37) discussing the allocation of experimental media arts funding (including film, television and video) mentions the Media Study/Buffalo fellowship program "which redresses, somewhat, the exclusion of New York artists from the NEA/AFI program." Half of this \$50,000 program was funded by NYSCA alone with \$15,000 provided by local donations and Media Study/Buffalo itself and the remaining \$10,000 provided by the NEA, a mere 20 percent. Nonetheless, the groups shown the most support from the NEA were large established institutions be they traditional or more experimental, while the most vulnerable were the smallest, most experimental groups, rural constituencies, minority groups, and individual artists, especially those at the most innovative end of the art-making process. (DiMaggio 1986a:67,81-83) This meant that many downtown artists and arts organisations were the most affected by cuts in public funding.

There were several reasons for their vulnerability. First, many of the small budget programmes aimed at aiding smaller, more experimental projects were axed or severely restricted. After Reagan lost his battle for substantial cuts in the NEA budget, "the administration has settled for a slow war of attrition, eliminating those social programs like CETA [Comprehensive Education and Training Act] that provided incidental support for the arts...." (80) That support was not incidental for smaller organisations. A grant from CETA of \$3950, for example, appears on the 1979-80 fiscal report of Fashion Moda, making up 11 percent of their public funding. (Fashion Moda, n.d.c.) This source of funding disappeared from their subsequent reports. Likewise, grants from other key public bodies shrink significantly over the years of Fashion Moda's operation. After rising to \$25,000 from the NEA and \$8,000 from the NYSCA in 1982, the figures drop to a combined figure of \$15,000 from both the Business Council on the Arts (BCA) and New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) by 1986.

With cuts in NEA funding, many New York groups looked to state and municipal bodies for money. However, groups had difficulties were experienced here as well. One problem had to do with historical affiliation. Small arts organisations and many individual artists simply did not have the historical affiliation with the cities in which they were situated, as did the larger established organisations. Both state and municipal governments were often bound to these institutions through its historical long-term support, or even outright ownership, and were seen as central elements of a city's prestige and historic culture. Smaller groups lacked this political and historical relationship leaving them at the bottom of the list of cultural priorities. This was the case made by Levine (1993:139) with regards to the DCA and New York City in particular. The municipal government's historical affiliations with some of the city's key museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum, bound them to political, and therefore financial, support.



As one might expect, historical affiliations between elite members of society who founded and maintained major arts institutions and politicians also played a role in the access to funding. Not only have these elites historically been the most avid supporters of government subsidy since they would be the ones to benefit from them, but they have had the political connections to lobby most effectively for that support. As Levine (*passim*) explained with regards to the DCA, the more local funding bodies did not have the same relative autonomy from government institutions that the NEA, for instance, does. This meant that groups wishing to receive grants must appeal directly to politicians. Whilst larger groups often had their own personnel who focus only on lobbying for funds, smaller groups often did not have the requisite skills or experience of political lobbying, nor the connections to access politicians. Since many politicians did not have the time to see huge numbers of arts groups, the smaller, less connected ones simply could not get their foot in the door.

The money that was allocated for smaller, more experimental groups was often tied to 'use value'. This was especially the case for municipal funding bodies that were directly responsible to the elected politicians and their constituents since the product of the funding was required to show direct benefits for the community. "Rather than issues arising from (and related to) conditions in the arts world, political concerns such as pleasing the greatest number of people the greatest amount of the time, rewarding one's friends, and otherwise attempting to ensure one's political survival are what drive New York City's allocation of arts resources (and, by extension, arts policy)." (Levine 1993:144) As a result, educational use became one of the main criteria for groups both large and small in New York, particularly when approaching the DCA. Large organisations did not find this difficult since they were sufficiently large to branch out into educational programs. Smaller groups whose mandate was to connect with community services, like Fashion Moda, were fortunately able to make the case for community involvement and educational benefit.<sup>5</sup> Many, however, (think of those involved with Club 57, for instance) would have had a hard time convincing government officials that their activity was 'educational' or a benefit to the community in any direct sense.

Aside from these obstacles, a more fundamental problem existed for small arts organisations and individual artists that limited their access to scarce resources. It lay in the difference of organisational structure between many small organisations and government bureaucratic agencies. As cultural sociologist, Richard Peterson (1986), explained, larger arts organisations switched from individual leadership conducted by one well-connected "impresario" to an arts administration structure that complemented the simultaneous growth in government bureaucracy. Both Peterson (171) and DiMaggio (1986a:81) concluded that by operating similar formal management structures, the larger arts organisations were able to facilitate interaction and the formal accountability required by not only governments, but foundations and

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Fashion Moda did receive DCA money in the 1980s. (Fashion Moda n.d.c)



corporations as well, as they became structurally “isomorphic”.<sup>6</sup> Small organisations did not tend to work with such structures. They were considered risky since they are often unstable with informal management structures that did not accommodate the formal accountability required from a bureaucratic system. Colab, for instance, despite operating effectively as a democratic group whereby artists acted as their own administrators, still organised themselves as a group with formal structures, (i.e. a president, a vice president, a secretary, a treasurer, etc.), which facilitated funding. Individuals, then, seeking funding often did not stand a chance.

The point of outlining the difficulties in accessing funds by these small, experimental groups is to highlight the fact that many of the downtown artists and their art production did not fit within the structures and requirements for arts support from government bodies. Indeed, as the federal government squeezed funding, an imbalance between support for both traditional bodies and established experimental organisations and small, experimental groups increased. And, although some public money did filter through into the downtown scene, they were not representative of government arts policy as it developed from the late 1970s into the 1980s.

## II

Although the nature of the relationship between state and New York’s downtown arts scene is important to establish, one may argue that few critics or historians of the time who wrote on the scene were commenting directly upon it. Indeed, the forms of power that tended to be analysed by poststructuralist art critics in particular were not those of government policy but the textual manifestations of late capitalism and its associated ideologies. As a result, instead of investigating the precise historical mechanisms by which government policy and wider political developments influenced the art world, critics often restricted their focus to how art works were textually isomorphic with the downtown arts scene’s relationship to corporate activity and entertainment.

Interest in the connection between the state and art, then, was less prevalent, although, significantly, never very far away, particularly once the election campaign got underway in late 1979. One reason for this seems to be the overtly ideological nature of Ronald Reagan’s campaign. As one political commentator noted after three years of Reagan rule, “the president has sensed that ideology, symbol, myth, dream, vision – those clusters of emotional yearnings and half-formulated systems – still play a major part in our political life.” (Howe 1984:389) And this aspect of political life, its ideology, was an area of intense interest to critics and academics.

Reagan was not alone in his ideologically-driven politics, of course. Many viewed him as simply the mouthpiece for those behind the scenes looking to put forward their vision and agenda. That group were largely identified as “neo-conservatives” based within the Republican Party, and it was their promotion of ‘free-market’ economic policy, and their reputations as ‘high-

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<sup>6</sup> This term was adopted by Peterson (171) from an earlier article by P. DiMaggio and W. Powell, (1983), “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields,” *American*



roller entrepreneurs', that marked them, and the entire Reagan administration, as such. Indeed, the meaning of Robinson and McCormick's (1984:137) phrase "Reaganite zeitgeist" could only be understood with this in mind, as could Rosler's (1998:97) description of the administration's ideological attitude as "cynical me-firstism." In other words, what seemed to be the case was that a three-way equation was made between ideology, entrepreneurialism and neo-conservatism. Art critics thus defined neo-conservatism by its laissez-faire economic philosophy.

There is no doubt that the 'greed is good' mantra was proudly and frequently repeated by many neo-conservative Republicans, and was the basis of many economic analyses and policies by the administration along with many of their supporters. The enthusiasm with which economist Arthur Laffer's trickle down economic theories were extolled by 'converts' like Congressman Jack Kemp, and the spreading of that message by the likes of Jude Wanniski, editorialist for the *Wall Street Journal*, indicated the degree to which such a pro-market, anti-welfare, and ultimately 'pro-individualism' stance was a force within the neo-conservative camp.<sup>7</sup>

However, despite this seemingly overwhelming philosophy of 'every man for himself', the neo-conservative coalition could not have come into being without a high level of compromise and collective union that transformed them from the weak and marginal group that supported Republican Barry Goldwater's electoral campaign in 1964 into the formidable force they became.<sup>8</sup> Groups historically at odds such as big business coalitions like the Business Roundtable and small business coalitions like the National Federation of Independent Business, found common ground in their mutual frustrations over a stagnant economy and the growth of groups such as consumer or environmental lobbies calling for corporate accountability. (McQuaid 1994:Ch.8) More importantly, though, the right found a pillar around which it could unite groups as otherwise diverse as big business and the religious right whose main membership came from the white, rural, disenfranchised poor of the South. That pillar was not, as is commonly assumed, an economic one (few in the poor region of the South *wanted* to see their benefits cut whilst few in the corporate ranks of America were vehement anti-abortionists<sup>9</sup>) but centred around nationalism and patriotism - in other words, around foreign policy. (Berman 1994:111) After a decade of international humiliation and disgrace including the Vietnam War, the power exercised by OPEC and the Iranian hostage crisis, the promise of American dominance on the world stage once again, restoring national pride, appealed to many diverse groups of Americans. Thus the threat of communism both abroad in the Soviet Union and closer

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*Sociological Review*, 48: 147-160.

<sup>7</sup> For a historical account of the spread of Laffer's ideas amongst key neo-conservatives and eventually to Reagan himself, see Johnson 1991:99-103.

<sup>8</sup> McQuaid (1994:165) made the point that Reagan and Goldwater shared the same core "bases of business support" (different than those of, say, Nixon) making the growth of the neo-conservative core of small business and wealthy independent entrepreneurs all the more spectacular. Johnson (1991:ch. 5) also placed the beginnings of neo-conservatism with the Goldwater campaign.

<sup>9</sup> A few, like right-wing populist George Gilder, tried to marry religious fundamentalism and 'free-market' economics. (Johnson 1991:113-115) Most, though, simply glossed over the differences. One 'sun-belt' entrepreneur dismissed the issue of abortion - a key issue for the religious right - as unimportant, prioritising instead "economic dominance...and our military defense ability" (cited in Johnson:74), which only serves to highlight the very real differences that huddled under the neo-conservative umbrella.



to home in Central America motivated the revival and revamping of fantastic defence strategies with overwhelming support from all who wished to restore America's imperial optimism. Ultimately national pride in the form of flag-waving Americana, with a hawkish foreign policy as its defining feature, became the central rallying point for the many disparate factions of the neo-conservative coalition.

In stark contrast, most historians have marked 1968-70 as the point at which the popularity of the liberal agenda and the Democratic Party began to decline. (Karger and Stoesz 1993:214; Berman 1994:29, 42-3; Lawrence 1994:416) And, as in the case with Republican neo-conservatives, this turning of the tides was due in significant part to the ability of its adherents to find some unifying platform around which groups with differing agendas could unite. From 1968, the Democratic left began to experience "deepening ideological and racial divisions." (Berman 1994:101-2) Up to that point, they had held together, in relatively peaceful harmony. "Since the 1940s, the Democratic Party had been the party of good times...[with their] proud coalition of North and South, black and white, have and have-nots." (59) Despite having differing agendas in several respects, they found common ground upon which to steer Democratic decisions in relative unison. However, with tensions running high after severe civil unrest, the broad coalition began to fragment, opposing one another rather than the Republican right, leading to the development of 'special interest groups' which focused solely on single issue agendas. Andy Merrifield (2000:192) highlighted the fragmentation of working class interest groups that, over time, completely lost sight of common agendas. This same pluralistic scenario was replicated in all facets of the Democratic left, from minority groups to feminists to social issue campaigners who, again, organised themselves within the confines of the issue itself or even turned inward, fading from the front lines of social protest. (Blum 1991:480)

Splintering within the party had devastating effects on their capacity to set the agenda either nationally or within their own party. Because the American welfare state, under the New Deal, did not emerge as a coherent social vision but rather a piecemeal of individual initiatives (Karger and Stoesz 1993:212), Democrat leaders did not have a core platform upon which to rely when groups began identifying and promoting their own individual needs. Many on the left of centre were isolated without any centralising platform, and, as Blum (1991:480) pointed out, "the momentum of reform slackened...." He went on to explain that "[d]ivided from one another, the outsiders in American life, the poor and the proscribed, lacked the political strength to force the leaders of the Democratic party to heed their needs." And even those leaders who wanted to heed their needs could not muster the collective support needed to carry a comprehensive platform. "Blacks, Jews, women, organized labor, and environmentalists now spoke for their own special concerns...But because they lacked a larger purpose and one voice, these elements of a fraying Democratic coalition did not offer a program with which a majority of voters could identify; nor did they propose a cogent defense of a general interest that would address the larger concerns of society...." (Berman 1994:42-3) Consequently, there were as many proposals for the future of the party and for liberal and leftist politics as there were politicians on Capitol Hill. And this state of affairs continued well into the 1990s.



Such rifts were not only brought about by left-leaning groups, as was particularly evident in the South from the 1970s onwards. From as early as the post-civil war era, Democrats had dominated the political arena since Lincoln's Republican administration imposed anti-slavery legislation on a society based on racial subordination. In addition, Republicans were viewed as responsible for the Great Depression of the 1930s, an era that saw the South hit particularly hard. The GOP had almost abandoned hope of ever holding sway in the South. "In 1950 there were no Republican senators from the South and only 2 Republican representatives out of 105 in the southern House delegation. Nowhere in the United States had a major political party been so feeble for so many decades." (Black and Black 2002:2-3) A change began with shifts in demographics, from poor rural to prosperous urban, along with concurrent economic shifts from agriculture to industry and service. In addition, the mobilisation of left-leaning civil liberties groups within the Democratic party, symbolised by Lyndon Johnson's Great Society governmental initiatives and the subsequent nomination of George McGovern, had the effect of prying open fissures within the Democratic coalition along North South lines.<sup>10</sup> The further failure of Georgia-born Jimmy Carter to control the crippling stagflation of the 1970s and high unemployment meant that Democratic Southerners felt betrayed by the party in terms of both racial and economic policy. They subsequently looked elsewhere for political reinforcement, thereby forming their own uncompromising voter block unwilling to negotiate with other Democratic interest groups

### III

It is within this context that we must understand the politics of downtown cultural producers. My aim is not to argue that these artists were characteristically on the radical left, although some were. What I will argue instead is that we can see similarities between the ideological dynamic of the Democratic party with the activities of many downtown artists rather than those of the neo-conservative right that eventually formed the core of Reagan's support.

The first notable similarity between the liberal left and the downtown artists is the parallel splintered nature of each respective community, or, rather, *communities*. Although an incredible number of artists crossed-over between galleries and projects, as discussed in previous chapters, the focus of each group remained distinct. For instance, several not-for-profit art centres opened up with aims to be more than simply alternatives to commercial galleries. Fashion Moda was one such space that turned its attention to the artistic activity within the South Bronx and attempted to act as an interface between the local culture and the international art community. (Fashion Moda, n.d.a) Another such space was ABC No Rio Dinero that, aside from focusing upon the gentrification of the Loisaída<sup>11</sup>, was in fact a splinter group itself from the

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<sup>10</sup> More specifically, Black and Black (2002:74-77) have marked the defeat of the Southern filibuster over the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as the turning point in the dominance of the Democratic Party in the South. The nomination of Republican Barry Goldwater provided "an alternative to the Democratic party. Conservative whites who despised the party of Lincoln might appreciate the party of Goldwater." (77)

<sup>11</sup> The name is derived from the Latino pronunciation of 'Lower East Side'. (Kirwin 1999:9n20)



larger co-operative network, Colab. Artistic collective centred around political or intellectual visions rather than spaces also emerged such as Group Material who claimed that their group “was founded as a constructive response to the unsatisfactory ways in which art has been conceived, produced, distributed and taught in American society” (Group Material 1985:22) and Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PADD) whose “goal [was] to provide artists with an organized relationship in society, to demonstrate the political effectiveness of image making.” (PADD 1985:28) Colab itself was a collective organised in large part to provide opportunities for artists to acquire government funding. Other artistic groups were more informal although equally as distinct. Groups that based themselves at clubs – Club 57, Mudd Club or the New Cinema (a Colab project) for example – maintained a sense of collectivity around their particular activities. Steven Hager (1986:72) highlighted those differences when he explains that “[t]he original Mudd Clubbers, the most established group, were older and more influenced by European culture than the emerging younger generation. The Club 57 crowd was more interested in the sort of sensibility embodied by the B-52s.” Club 57, unlike the Mudd Club, was heavily influenced by the camp sensibility of their members such as John Sex and Ann Magnuson who produced events that relished in the glamour and artifice of American popular culture. Furthermore, their favourite hangout could differentiate the approaches to their subject matter. “While Club 57 was presenting its criticisms of society in the form of satire and parody, a more straightforward and radical viewpoint was simultaneously being expressed by the older generation, the Colab artists.” (73)

The particular point of comparison in this analysis, though, is not simply that the downtown scene was made up of many small groups, but that they often held antagonistic aesthetic and political attitudes to one another despite the consistent crossover of artists between groups and projects and, as we shall see, common political alignment. Certainly, the groups that characterised themselves and their aims in terms of political activism, such as PADD or ABC No Rio, also defined themselves against those artistic groups that were not activists and particularly against the commercial art world activity of the East Village. Gregory Sholette (1997:17), a former member of PADD, divided the groups of individuals who moved to the Lower East Side in the 1970s into two categories – those seeking art world status via the traditional artist/patron route, and those looking to experience “something ‘authentic,’ such as the imagined organic quality of other peoples’ (ethnic) communities” – in his recollections of the period, thereby disassociating the aims of activists from those of other artists within the same artistic neighbourhood. Similarly, Lucy Lippard (1985:v) separated her favoured political artists from the larger downtown art scene in the foreword to ABC No Rio’s 1985 compendium. “In 1979-80, a lot of the Colab-type work (the stuff that’s been watered down to be shown in the classiest glass-doored East Village showcases) looked scary to me.” She went on to say, “[t]hanks to some of the No Rio stalwarts, among others, a lot of artists have begun to take for granted that you can integrate your art and your politics without screwing up either one.” In both cases, the authors attempted to put distance between themselves and other groups of downtown artists. In addition, activist groups had divisions amongst themselves. Mundy McLaughlin (Hall 1983/84:3) explained that within Group Material “[t]here were always several



groups, subgroups threatening to split the whole thing up. It was a joke.” Another member, Julie Ault, recalled two different subgroups that definitely split – a feminist “faction” and a “careerist faction” – both of whom left in 1981. Again, in both cases, antagonism between the different groups of artists motivated them to separate.

And the activist artist groups were not the only ones to differentiate themselves. The clubs and other arts venues maintained “a certain amount of tension, jealousy, and snobbery [that] divided the various scenes.” (Hager 1986:72) One way of understanding these groupings is in terms of ‘cliques’ since none of them had manifestos or official membership like the more organised political activists. Certainly, several artists, when interviewed, referred to cliques as an accurate way to describe many of the artistic groupings, and curator, Liza Kirwin (1999:ch.6) devoted a chapter of her study on the East Village to this issue entitled “‘High School’ Bohemia”. She pointed out that the way many scene participants “defined their clique was to tell me what they ‘hated’.” (251) And, although an element of personal like and dislike was undoubtedly a factor, many of the differences were in fact based upon their artistic practice, style and interests. For instance, Hager (1986:72) wrote, “[n]ot everyone approved of what was happening at Club 57. As the Club descended deeper into American pop culture, the Mudd Club crowd lost interest. A few of the New Cinema directors screened films at Club 57, but it was obvious that the two cliques had vastly different sensibilities.” Indeed, one artist I interviewed dismissed the appropriateness of the inclusion of another of my interviewees’, a graffiti artist, in my project since she felt he did not fit into what she considered to be the downtown scene, which she characterised in terms of her own group’s conceptual approach. By contrast, another member of that same group felt it was appropriate to include graffiti artists since he felt they had been unduly neglected given their role within the downtown scene. Crucially, the graffiti artist considered himself and his closest cohorts to be very much intertwined with the same artistic milieu as the other two artists. Even though the various groups were heavily interconnected through a multitude of individual crossovers and, often, were working against a similar enemy - the institutionalised art world – they devoted much of their effort to distancing themselves from one another using their group identity to do so.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly, the divisions of the downtown art scene reveals the same ideological dynamic between these groups as that of the schisms in the larger political Democratic left. Both developed splits that resulted in competitive infighting, their common enemies notwithstanding, stemming from the incompatibilities of their political positions. Nonetheless, these parallels cannot, in and of themselves, lead to any conclusion that the artists of the downtown scene were necessarily institutionally affiliated with the Democratic left. After all, other artistic groups suffered equally from divisiveness, most infamously, the Surrealists. Infighting amongst artists is certainly not an uncommon art historical phenomenon. However, the parallel does serve both as the backdrop to the development of the downtown arts scene, and, more crucially, as support

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, groups did not always choose to separate themselves. Critics often made the divisions. Graffiti, interestingly, was one of those groups for several reasons, two of which were the fact that the movement did not spring from the art world and that their style was distinct. However, the consistent relationship of the graffitiists with other downtown artists certainly provided every reason to include them within that artistic community.



for an analysis of the issues and concerns that were raised in many of their works across group boundaries. The reason for this is two-fold. First, as we will see, the issues raised by these artists, be they satiric or serious, matched those concerns raised by the various groups within the Democratic left, and not those of the neo-conservative right. Second, these issues were the same single-issue politics that the artists shared with the Democratic left and led in both instances to a similar divisiveness.

To establish the first point that the political leanings of these artists were toward the liberal left and not the right, we must turn, in the first instance, to the content of the works produced within the artistic communities in downtown New York. Concerns over right-wing domestic and foreign policy were everywhere. One predominant concern centred on a particularly notable leftist issue group – the anti-nuclear development lobby.<sup>13</sup> The threat of nuclear catastrophe preoccupied punks (Hager 1986:1), and this clearly carried through into the ‘alternative’ arts and music scene that subsequently developed. For instance, a lamp by Dan Friedman (Fig. 27), with an image of the Three Mile Island nuclear facility on the shade and festive trim dotted around the lamp, addressed the abiding concern over the nuclear disaster at the site and its relation to the power generated in our homes. Every time the user turned on the light, nuclear power becomes an issue for them in their own home. Kenny Scharf’s 1979 image *Escaped in Time; Very Pleased* (Fig. 28) not only responded to the imminent threat of nuclear war but also portrays a disturbing sense of the lack of concern by the affluent middle classes as depicted by the smiling and glamorous woman in the space shuttle. The juxtaposition of the optimistic, even naïve 1950s era, represented by the woman, with the context of the pessimism associated with the late 1970s provides the image with its darkly comic tone. Another work, this time a mural by the artists John Fekner and Crash entitled “Suffolk Street Fallout Shelter” (1981), depicted a skyline ablaze with a missile as it heads into the centre of the city. Overtop are the typeface instructions “In case of nuclear war step inside”. Actual steps line the front of the mural but lead only to the bricked up entrance upon which the image is painted, thereby suggesting that there is in fact no way to escape such a catastrophe. Furthermore, if one were to transcend the physical boundary of the wall and enter into the image, one could only return to the devastated city. These works are motivated not by any support of hawkish defence policy rhetoric but of the possible consequences of such a policy.

Artists also directly addressed specific political policies and explored the complex relationships of issues that were involved, two of which were particularly prominent. One focussed upon the dire living conditions within the most deprived neighbourhoods in New York. As discussed in chapter 3, many works, particularly those of artists involved with ABC No Rio like Rebecca Howland, highlighted the interconnected development of real estate values with urban decay and targeted both developers and politicians as responsible for unjust gentrification practices. Other artists broadened the relationship of neighbourhood problems to the national and international level. For instance, in the light of Reagan’s intervention in Central America,

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Blum (1991:480) argued that feminists and environmentalists were the only two militant groups from the late 1960s to sustain their activist voice into the Reagan era.



Anton van Dalen's 1982 photocopied-poster project entitled "Shooting Gallery," targeted foreign policy and drugs through his juxtaposition of a military jet armed with missiles and a needle, tourniquet and human arm. These two symbols were set within a deprived urban milieu indicated as such by an abandoned car and stray dog. A further layer of meaning was added when Van Dalen turned the posters into an active symbol by pasting them directly over the holes through which dealers passed drugs to users between abandoned buildings. Through such works, Van Dalen was making the political claim that Reagan's intervention in Central America, and his support of questionable regimes that were financed by the drug industry, bore direct relation to the drug problem faced in Loisaída.

Second, some artists recognised and criticised the broad economic changes taking place in western capitalism. On the more general level, works like David Wojnarowicz's 1985 dollar bill covered head of a dinosaur-like creature, clutching a small globe in its sharp-toothed jaws (Fig. 20), used simple, obvious symbolism providing an unequivocal statement of the global reach of US economic power. The artist, John Fekner, employed similar strategies using direct and accessible symbolism, this time with stencilled words, to comment upon features of the changing American economic situation. His site-specific stencil *Industrial Fossil*, similar to the ones in Fig. 4 and Fig. 5, was painted onto an abandoned delivery truck, thus highlighting the shift from a Fordist-type industrial complex (represented by the truck) to a communications age via the proliferation of computer-based technology in the Reagan heartland of the sunbelt. In this piece, Fekner addressed the economic situation thereby providing a more concrete and specific analysis than the general criticism raised in Wojnarowicz's work.

Aside from just individual artists, artistic groups themselves concerned themselves with governmental and business political agendas, even splintering off from larger groups as was the case with ABC No Rio Dinero, which left Collaborative Projects to focus solely upon the issue of gentrification on the Lower East Side in early 1981. As discussed in chapter 3, shows like *The Real Estate Show* (the founding show for ABC No Rio) and *Not For Sale* (organised by PADD and held in part at ABC No Rio) were intended as direct interventions in the group's political campaign.<sup>14</sup> Other groups were not as issue-specific as ABC No Rio, yet still maintained a centralising focus rather than a broad platform. Fashion/Moda also focused on neighbourhood issues, this time in the South Bronx, only their aim was to connect the activity of the South Bronx with other artistic neighbourhoods both nationally and internationally. Group Material, rather than settling in one neighbourhood, opted to support single issues in various locations such as *Timeline* (1984), a critique of American interference in Central America at P.S.1. By this means, they were able to concentrate their political effort one issue at a time.

Not all works and artists, however, were so overtly motivated by political policy. Many works drew upon issues of identity that were increasingly important in American society and, as we have seen, were often at the heart of the Democratic platform. A crucial form of identity that



has often been neglected when discussing the scene but was key to its character was that of sexual identity. Contemporary gay liberation had been initiated with Stonewall in 1969 and, throughout the 1970s a new turn in the efforts to define one's sexuality within this more open environment became evident. Whereas 1950s and 60s gay identity had been characterised by camp effeminate characteristics, usually labelled as 'sissies', 'queens' or 'fairies,' the 1970s saw the development of an ultra-macho identity. Men assuming this new role became known as 'clones' demarcating themselves from the 'effeminate' roles. The gender nonconformity of the former roles was increasingly marginalised within the gay community itself throughout the decade, developing a subtle rift between the two sensibilities.<sup>15</sup>

Many of the downtown artists, however, overtly identified with the effeminate roles of the former decades and saw themselves within that group. Keith Haring overtly asserted their identity as distinct from the predominantly macho attitudes when he stencilled "Clones Go Home" all along the western perimeter of the East Village as a symbol of their break from the 'tough guy' gays of the West Village. Haring also formed an imaginary group called 'Fags Against Facial Hair' making reference to the thick moustaches worn by 'clones', thereby separating himself and other gay artists working on the Lower East Side, aligning their community instead with "queens". (Hager 1986:75-76, Gruen 1991:57)

Part of the expression of the 'queen' identity derided by clone culture was the overt use of camp in downtown artists' work and personae. And, not only did the use of camp signal a break within gay culture, it also demonstrated a rejection of the austere, 'straight' art world of SoHo since camp attitudes were simply not acceptable within the subdued, intellectual SoHo scene. After all, Haring did not just consider his graffiti warning to clones as a mere message; he considered it art intended to contrast work produced on the Lower East Side to that of the chic, trendy areas adjacent. (Gruen 1991:57) The gay camp element of the downtown scene was markedly visible through performance artists of various descriptions. (Kirby 1985:4) David McDermott, painter and performer, took on the role of 'Edith' for a period, a 1930s tenement dweller. He lived the role as he both dressed the part and engaged in the daily routine of cooking, cleaning and ironing. He was also the driving force, along with Magnuson and Tom Scully, for the New Wave Vaudeville show. Originally conceived of as "some art thing involving drag queens in a basement", the show evolved into a variety revue of hyped up performers and over-the-top acts. (Hager 1986:20-37) Key elements of camp were visible throughout the show. Extreme artifice was visible in Klaus Nomi's gothic space age outfit and make up (Fig. 25) and in his act. Through such otherworldly antics, he aimed to induce complete alienation in the audience, rather than engage them on some personal level of identification. Nostalgia was in abundance, particularly in McDermott's Egyptian-themed performance sung in turn-of-the-century vaudevillian style. And tied in with the nostalgia, was the glamour of past eras of

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<sup>14</sup> ABC No Rio's show, *Suburbia*, further attests to their narrow political remit since it was criticised from other artists "who felt No Rio should present work related to urban problems and the indigenous population...." (Moore and Miller 1985:124)

<sup>15</sup> While my summary must remain brief by necessity, greater elaboration and analysis of this development can be found in Taywaditep (2001) and Levine (1992).



American popular culture. Donna Destri, acting as the announcer for each act, appeared as a 1950s B-movie starlet oozing the exaggerated sexuality.<sup>16</sup>

Camp played a major role in their other works such as in the solo career of Klaus Nomi, in the performances of John Sex, and in the nostalgic paintings of McDermott and McGough who deliberately moved back in time with each set of new works. All of these artists were making overt and visible statements about the expression of their sexuality and identity as gay males in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The downtown art scene provided them with an accepting environment in which to express these manifestations of their identity.

Another key issue of identity was gender, and downtown women artists were no exception. Performance artist, Karen Finley, someone whose participation in the downtown New York scene is often omitted from her biographical details, dealt directly with sexuality and the female body, often confronting audiences with pieces that centred directly upon her own anatomy. Although often analysed with respect to gender issues, she herself openly acknowledged her concentration on feminist concerns when she stated that, "I feel I have a responsibility to denounce the myths about women and psychology created by Freud and others like him. I have to talk about these things until people stop asking me whether or not I'm a feminist." (Robinson 1987:45)

There was even the formation of women's groups that provided a uniting and supportive environment for many of the women within the scene. One directly political art event, the *Lesbian Summer Culture Festival*, was specifically intended as an exclusive exhibition opportunity for the community's women artists. Indeed, debates often raged within its walls about whether or not men (or even male children) should be allowed to enter into the exhibition space. (Sampson 1979:5) Women also felt the need to separate from the larger groups in which they began. The first faction to separate from Group Material, for instance, was a group concerned with feminist issues. Ault (Hall 1983/84:3) explained that the focus of these women on feminist issues took them away from their focus on art, the main interest of the remaining Group Material members. "The four of us are artists. They were into curating educational exhibits, organizing, educating the public about feminism...." In order to concentrate their efforts on these issues, they felt it necessary to split from the group with a more varied agenda.

Although only some of the women artists active within the scene claimed to be 'feminists', the vociferous debates generated by the feminist movement indubitably brought all women into the discussion. Many downtown women artists engaged in the issue of female identity, influenced not by discussions generated by 'feminists' but by issues that surfaced in the conceptions of gender and femininity of camp like artifice, nostalgia and glamour, particularly with reference to popular culture. For instance, performance artist Ann Magnuson developed a series of characters that comically centred around female stereotypes with particular reference

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<sup>16</sup> These characteristics are in no way intended as a *definition* of camp but do appear consistently in reflections on camp culture. See Sontag (1986), Bronski (1984) and Ross (1989:chapter 5).



to stardom, even including Mary Margaret McKeon, the highflying celebrity art dealer based on, of course, the infamous Mary Boone. Posing in typical celebrity promotion conventions, she acknowledged the artificiality of such personas. She further demonstrated the constructed nature of stars through her ability to adopt and drop each persona within equally constructed environments within which they arise. For instance, Magnuson staged a performance of her country singer character, Tammy Jan, at the alternative space the Kitchen entitled "Tammy Gets an Emmy." (Fig. 29) In this piece, she humorously flaunted the artificiality of the 'achievement' of such awards as well as the insincere gushing gratitude expected particularly of female recipients as a sign of sincerity and even humility in the face of success.

The work of Claudia De Monte, Rhonda Zwillinger, and Keiko Bonk worked with exaggerated conceptions of 'feminine sensibility'. In De Monte's case, she created small, craft-like pieces (described by McCormick 1984a:30 as "cake decoration style") shaped as women performing stereotypical housewife duties such as cleaning and cooking. These pieces, aside from the obvious statement about the role of women in the home, were imbued with an overstated sweet and sincere tone that further directed attention to underlying notions of domesticity and a supposedly 'natural' feminine sentimentality. In Zwillinger and Bonk's cases, the notion of femaleness explored was that which is mediated through representations of romance in media images. Bonk (Fig. 30) used kitschy depictions of romance and melodrama partially derived from image conventions found in posters destined for teenage girls' bedroom walls, heightening their melodramatic effects by applying Expressionist use of colour and sweeping brushstrokes, creating a paradox between mass media techniques of one medium and the supposed individualistic expressions of emotion from the other. Zwillinger examined romance through images typical of the 1950s that were geared specifically toward the female audience. For example, in Fig. 31 we see a shot from the 1950 film, *Father of the Bride*, in which Spencer Tracy and Elizabeth Taylor stand arm in arm as Tracy prepares to walk his daughter down the aisle. The two figures on the right-hand side of Zwillinger's 1985 diptych, *The Promise*, in Fig. 32 evidently refer to the film's leads and acts not as a mere replica of any particular scene but as an exposure of the sexual undertones and male domination in the naïve depiction of patriarchal familial relationships. In both instances, the focus on the conventions of romance are so overt that their political relationship to the shaping of women's roles in society is hard to ignore.

Groups like Ann Magnuson's Ladies Auxiliary of the Lower East Side or the later East Village group, Girls' Night, were set up as fun social groups based on a cross between an old fashioned ladies society and a girl's slumber party working within the nostalgia of older forms of female social communities. Events for the Ladies Auxiliary, for example, included a slumber party complete with male go-go dancers<sup>17</sup>, a Mary Kay demonstration and a debutante ball. (Hager 69-70) Their frivolity notwithstanding, these groups still provided a source of support and opportunity for women artists and performers to work together. Many of the participants in the



East Village's 'Girl's Night', along with Magnuson's group, held positions of power as gallery owners, club managers, or business women in both retail and publishing. Kirwin (1999:270) argued that "Girl's Night represented the power of women in the East Village. Judy Glantzman noted, 'it was far more democratic than SoHo was and yet it was definitely a place where women had power -- women dealers, which was a more traditional thing, but also women artists.'" The over-the-top nature of such events (Magnuson referred to her group as "a warped version of the Junior League") allowed the women of the downtown scene to have fun with and even transcend the general role of women prescribed by the 'serious' versions of such ladies' groups.

Ethnicity also played a role for several downtown artists. Again, with a typical tongue-in-cheek irony to many East Village works, Tseng Kwong Chi produced a series of auto-portraits that play upon ethnic stereotyping and politics. Given the dominance of Cold War rhetoric at the time, the works invoke the depiction of East/West divisions as portrayed both in the media and by politicians. Another artist who was largely dismissed by academic critics at the time but has since been reclaimed by scholars is Jean-Michel Basquiat. He has been described as being "preoccupied ...with [his] Puerto Rican and African roots," (Brown 1996:57) a characterisation amply demonstrated in his works. Alison Pearlman (1997:172-187) and African-American studies scholar Bell Hooks (1994:25-37) have provided compelling textual analyses of his imagery in paintings such as *Natives Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amerites on Safari* (1982) (Fig. 33) and *Hollywood Africans* (1983) (Fig. 34). Both writers have suggested that his work demonstrates a profound engagement with ideas surrounding African-Americans as 'other', including reflections on both primitivism and bohemianism as cliché especially in relation to his own position as a young African-American painter. And, far from being an isolated example within the downtown scene (as was suggested by writer Cora Marshall (2000) who viewed Basquiat as a lone ethnic minority figure), ethnic diversity was an unmistakable feature of their various interconnected communities.<sup>18</sup>

I would suggest that none of these examples reflect the characteristics of the neo-conservative movement, nor any of their issues and concerns. The works' imagery and themes were not nationalistic, patriotic or hawkish, and it would be a theoretical magic trick to label them as such, particularly since many of them wore their politics on their proverbial sleeve. They address some of the key concerns of the various democratic left issue groups such as the anti-nuclear lobby and feminists, along with some of the concerns found within this half of the political spectrum. It is hard to see how they may have been labelled Reaganite or even conservative.

Some objections may be raised at this point regarding my characterisation of these artists' and their works. One may be that the examples I have discussed were not the same

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<sup>17</sup> Dany Johnson, staff member of Club 57, specifically recalled that no other males were allowed into the event aside from the three male dancers, who were fellow artists Kenny Scharf, John Sex, and Shawn McQuate. (cited in Hager 1986:70)

<sup>18</sup> This included Asians, Hispanics, African-Americans and Europeans.



ones lambasted by the aforementioned critics. Certainly none of these images seems to compare to the few described by Lippard (1979) in her angry tirade against what she calls “retrochic” (one poster she described “featured a high-heel-booted, garterbelted female legs cut just above the crotch and standing over a toilet seat.”) Another objection may be that I have failed to acknowledge that some of these works *were* actually endorsed as positive aspects of downtown art. For instance, images from groups such as Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) were used to illustrate some left-leaning critics’ articles, like Craig Owens’ “The Problem with Peurilism”. ABC No Rio, too, was given the thumbs up by Deutsche and Ryan.

Curiously, though, downtown artists were rarely discussed by name, so it is difficult to say precisely which artists or works were being critiqued. Indeed, Lippard only vaguely defined her term ‘retrochic’ as “new wave” art that showed “a subtle current of reactionary content filtering through various art forms,” without mentioning any artists at all. No doubt, the silence over names of artists was intended as a statement in and of itself. Lippard explicitly states that she had boycotted many of the exhibitions she was rallying against, and the editors of *October* (1981:4) go as far as to say that they had “chosen...to ignore foolishness” that included most of the downtown art scene. Foster (1985a), in his rejection of downtown art, only mentioned Haring and Basquiat. One can suppose from the rejection of these two artists, along with the fact that they were intended by Foster to represent a larger trend, that a rejection of anyone within a (symbolic) twenty mile radius of them fell under the same critical umbrella. As for Lippard, her uncontested use of “new wave” and “punk” as descriptions were terms already in circulation at the time, employed to describe the artists covered in this study. One can only assume, then, that she is using the terms in a similar manner. In addition, she included Holzer as a ‘positive’ version of the art she has discussed, implying, like Foster, that the artistic milieu she had in mind was the one in which Holzer worked, the Lower East Side. The type of critique to which I have been referring, then, would apply, albeit unevenly, across my selection of artists and works. Wojnarowicz and Fekner, although never critically valorised, were probably acceptable.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, others such as Scharf, Kwong Chi, Zwillinger, Magnuson, and Basquiat were undoubtedly the implied targets.

Another objection may be that whilst some works seemed to be political in nature, most appeared to be apolitical by ignoring issues, trying to limit themselves to ‘emotional’ or even formalist concerns (although the number concerned with the latter were practically non-existent). Even the artists’ own advocate, Carlo McCormick (1984a:47), characterised the East Village group as “not a very politically activated group of artists” stating that they “seek only to express themselves” and cited John Fekner as the exception to the rule. To be sure, it was the case that not every single work, or every single artist of the downtown scene necessarily engaged with the political issues outlined above. However, a notable proportion across the entire range of downtown groups did so and to ignore them would be a major art historical

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<sup>19</sup> The former became more acceptable in retrospect, I suspect due to his strong effort in the AIDS campaign, although, curiously, Haring’s work with ACT-UP never afforded him the same re-evaluation.



blunder. Even in the case of McCormick, the images throughout his text contradict his own characterisation since not only does the image of Fekner appear overtly political but so do those of Wojnarowicz, Cameron, Fred Brathwaite, and even Zwillinger's *Give Me Liberty or Give Me Romance* (1983) that are all included within his text. To use the political label of neo-conservative or Reaganite, based on the characterisation of these artists as apolitical, would be an inaccurate assessment of the downtown art scene, at least on the level of content and political interests of the artists, be they specific political issues or general sympathies.

The political characterisation of artists and their works by critics was shaped, of course, by their own definitions and prescriptions for the political role of art, and it is here that we can locate two differences in approach between artists and critics. The first was over the issue of satire and irony as being a valid political stance. As may be seen in many of the examples already provided, these two elements, peppered with a large dose of cynicism, were in abundance in downtown art of the period. Many felt, in a period of recession, scandal, and distrust, that the sincere politics of 1960s counterculture was naïve. Steeped in punk's nihilism, these artists sought to undermine the sincere patriotism and belief in political leaders through what was, in effect, the humorous belittlement of what posed as serious and morally righteous. Although countless examples exist, the use of political and cultural images during the broadcasts of Glenn O'Brien's *TV Party* (first aired in December 1978) was notable. Positioned on set were iconic political images such as leaders portraits (Lenin, Mao) and the American flag whose conventional meanings were blasted in the context of *TV Party*. Notably, the juxtaposition between images usually construed as evil or deceptive (in the American context) were seen as equally weighted with those imbued with patriotic values. All political imagery, then, was taken from its 'natural' context thus highlighting its constructed uses. Further, the concurrent satirising of patriotism and commentary upon political issues that concerned artists specifically (for instance, a list was read out of artists who had been patronised by the Shah of Iran and then, in mock sincerity, given religious dispensation) and the wider social public (their 'Anti-War' show), were buttressed by cynical comments on the conviction that political leaders act on the behalf of their subjects.

A belief existed amongst the critics mentioned, though, that such iconoclastic use of political images was nothing more than lightweight antics. Indeed, many were offended by the lack of seriousness in such irreverent activity as was evident when Haring and John Sex chanced upon a 1940s sex guide in a bookshop that attempted to explain the nature of homosexuality, reducing it to gross stereotypes and fallacious bodily characteristics. Both Haring and Sex found the book so laughably ludicrous, they made 500 flyers of descriptions from the book and posted them around the West Village just in time for Gay Pride Week. Just like their downtown contemporaries such as De Monte, Zwillinger, Magnuson, Scharf, Kwong Chi and the many others whose works infused irony into post WWII images, they held the sincerity and utter ideological nature of these texts and images as antiquated, uptight and "absurd", in stark contrast to the attempt by neo-conservatives to reintroduce the supposed 50s



era of a 'moral golden age.' However, as Haring recalled, many people were outraged, despite the fact that both Haring and Sex were openly gay.<sup>20</sup>

The reaction must be understood within the attitudes of the gay community at the time, when the image of the gay male as ultra macho and anti-effeminate attitudes crescendoed in the late 1970s. (Taywaditep 2001:9-11) Interestingly, Messner (cited in *ibid*) wrote, "the gay culture seemed to be developing a love affair with hypermasculine displays of emotion and physical hardness..." One would imagine then, that any work highlighting the absurdities of the effeminate stereotypes would be well received. Given the lack of tolerance for parody, humour and irony though, all characteristics associated with camp, as seen in the irreverent posters of Haring and Sex, did not sit well with the ultra-macho gay community or with other serious artists. And, a fundamental part of this attitude was, at least in part, the principle that political statements must be serious in order to be effective.

Certainly, examples of the conviction that irony and humour were politically 'lightweight', 'ineffective' or even 'frivolous' abounded. Foster (1985b:152) used the phrase "passive parody" to dismiss any such strategy as politically effective. Richard Bolton (1998:23) began his negative characterisation of the downtown art scene as a mere reflection of corporate interests with a quote by Scharf about "having fun". The implication of Bolton's use of such a quote to indicate that such frivolity facilitated a conservative takeover in the arts. The editors of *October* (1981:4) claimed to have "directed our attention instead to what we felt was most *positive and serious* in the practice of contemporary art..." (italics added) implying, of course, that any work that was not serious was negative. Even the scene's own advocates accepted the belief that humour and irony undermined the political nature of the work. McCormick (1984a:30), in writing about Claudia De Monte, praised the artist for her exploration of women's roles as defined by household tasks, a discussion which could surely be defined as political. Yet he went on to say, "De Monte's feminism is without antagonism or cynicism. Her jokes, the absurd archetypes of societal roles as self-portrait, are objects of humor rather than sexual politics." The political subtext to many of the humorous, ironic, irreverent or iconoclastic works, then, were not viewed as substantive political statements and were understood by the most ardent critics as reactionary retreats from political responsibility.

It might be claimed that I have glossed over significant political differences between these artists, since on the surface the differences were notable. While Kenny Scharf advocated 'fun', PADD artists took a hardcore leftist stance. However, in practice and production, many significant similarities were present. First, the various forms of cheap media and site-specific works were produced across the board. Whilst photocopies, photographs, graffiti, and performance were used by artists not associated with the direct anti-capitalist position, so too were more traditional object works produced by those involved with the more politically vocal mandates (van Dalen's paintings for instance.) So too did artists crossover in terms of exhibition. Whilst artists like Basquiat and Haring, two of the most noted figures criticised for

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<sup>20</sup> This story is recounted in Hager (1986:74-75).



commercialism, showed work in shows with political themes, such as *Food for the Soup Kitchens* (1983) held at Fashion Moda (Fig. 35), so too did vociferously leftist artists show at commercial sites. PADD's *Not For Sale* project used the art bar, the Limbo Lounge, for instance. (Sholette 2003) And finally, whilst the former group of artists were chastised by key critics for their entrepreneurial ventures like Haring's art store, so too did artists associated with several of the key political art groups sell object-based works through catalogue projects and souvenir tables as at the *Times Square Show* and *Documenta 7*. Artists with t-shirts at Fashion Moda's *Document 7* store included, for example, Dan Asher, Joseph Beuys, John Fekner, Rebecca Howland, Keith Haring, Jenny Holzer, Crash, A One, Claes Oldenburg, Tom Otterness, Judy Rifka, Christy Rupp and Kiki Smith. (Fashion Moda (n.d.b) Since these similarities and relationships in practice are so fundamental (and yet overlooked by many of the critics of the scene), it seems reasonable to expect to find commonly shared political sympathies.

Surely, then, these artists, although perhaps guilty of the charge of cynicism, were not 'Reaganite' in their political preoccupations nor were they conservative in their appeal. After all, Hilton Kramer (1984) undoubtedly one of the most conservative critics, attacked many of these artists for being left wing and politically radical. "It (almost) goes without saying that the politics being served by this effort to discredit all disinterested artistic activity is the politics of the radical Left. Its favored themes at the moment are nuclear disarmament, radical feminism, and support for revolutionary movements in Central America. The favored targets, of course, are the policies of the United States government and the political and cultural institutions of democratic capitalism in general." (68) Many of the themes attacked by Kramer were precisely the issues found across the board in the downtown art scene. So if we can make the case that they were not handmaidens to the neo-conservative coalition, then why were they characterised as such?

One argument made at the time was repeated more often than any of the others mentioned thus far. Content or even artists' attitudes, it was held, were irrelevant since the emphasis placed by these artists was on object production and saleability. Douglas Crimp (Druckrey 1990:172) advanced this argument when he pointed to "a number of artists who, however much they proclaim their liberalism, are functioning in every way...as conservatives. Not so much traditional-value conservatives, but the conservatives that are working at this time in history – *market conservatives*." (italics in quote) After all, it became increasingly clear that capitalist strategies could envelope anything so long as the item in question possessed the capacity to act as a commodity regardless of its political sympathies. With the repositioning of 'free-market' capitalism at the forefront of neo-conservative political policy, relating the downtown scene's emphasis on commodity production to neo-conservatism seemed logical.

The first part of this accusation can be easily refuted since, has been shown, many of the works, like Fekner's stencils and Magnuson's performances, were not saleable objects. Nor were the examples to which I have referred unique. Such non-commodity based work comprised a significant share of the works produced. In addition, as I have already discussed, many artists not only practised graffiti, poster, and performance but also were also heavily



involved in music, film, video and even community television. And, whilst it is true that small object production was significant element to downtown artistic production of the period, McCormack (1999:159) quite rightly pointed out that many of the works that *were* objects were not “precious”. Like the posters produced by van Dalen, objects were often cheap and easily reproducible, and deliberately crude in their production and aesthetic. They held little value in and of themselves since they did not accrue the monetary value of a unique item. Indeed, one of the Colab artists’ main interests was in the multiple and their capacity to constantly regenerate a piece, thus challenging the usual art world method of value accrual through the production and valorisation of a unique artwork.<sup>21</sup>

The other connection between neo-conservatism and the downtown art scene highlighted in criticisms of the artists lay in their entrepreneurialism and its commercial engagement of the art world. These artists were viewed as businessmen and women who sought to gain money and fame through a cynical appropriation of subcultural expression, a highly capitalist enterprise. (Foster 1985:33-57, Owens 1984) These critics quite rightly recognised that the economic activity of the downtown artists possessed a significant political dimension. This dimension was characterised, they felt, by an apparent compatibility between the neo-conservative zeal for so-called free-market economics and downtown artists’ entrepreneurialism. After all, weren’t these artists embracing commercialism?

But the political nature of the choice of economic avenues was a complex one, not accurately captured by the critics’ characterisation. Artists did recognise and resent state interference in art production through the grant system. The state funding system favoured organised hierarchies with locatable spaces and administrators who produced budgets, proposals and mission statements (usually incorporating some form of ‘community service’). Intended to provide checks and balances of public accountability, government bodies were required to ensure that monies destined for artists fit within a defined and identifiable remit of acceptability. Artists wanting to receive funds, then, had to meet government guidelines. Although these guidelines sometimes explicitly emphasised educational and community benefits, often they were implicit based on the types of academically acceptable art already receiving funding. In many cases, academically acceptable art was precisely the same that was rejected by downtown artists. Understandably, they often viewed government funding and the conceptual and minimal art of the increasingly bureaucratic alternative space system as inextricably linked. The *objection* to government funding, then, was also an objection of what they viewed as an academically entrenched art production system.

Equally, their access to private monies was also more politically complex than the simple equation of private=conservative. As argued in chapter 3, downtown artists saw little, if

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<sup>21</sup> This is not to say, of course, that they *could not* accrue such value since over time they may have become more valuable as production stopped, thus putting a limit on the number of any one object. They also may have accrued value through the growth of the artists’ reputations over time. However, most accusations made concerning the commodification of these works were largely based upon the inherent value of an object as a collectible item,



any, corporate monies that were being channelled into corporate collections and sponsorship at the time. So any direct link that was assumed to exist between the two was usually nothing more than conjecture until well into the mid to late 1980s.<sup>22</sup> Whilst there is no doubt that these artists wanted to be successful, they viewed the more immediate context of private art world capital, SoHo in particular, as a bastion of conservative and corporate values in art. As a result, they aimed to set up their own artistic community, one not based on the traditional art world model – no commercial gallery opened there until 1981, but one developed by merging into an already existent alternative entertainment community. Production and consumption of artistic products and performances was conducted within the community itself, and success was often based on popularity within its confines or within an ‘alternative’ crowd who would also consume alternative entertainment and who usually aligned themselves in left-leaning politics. Keith Haring obviously knew that his audience was to be found within these circles when he handed out flyers for his show at an anti-nuclear demonstration. The more slick, professional SoHo audience, perceived by these artists as ‘the establishment’, were of less immediate concern.

Nor were they interested, it is well worth noting, in the suburban middle classes as their immediate audience, which for many downtown artists was an anathema to their sensibilities. As discussed in chapter 3, these artists embedded themselves in an urban culture that represented an escape from the sterile, bland, white conservative suburbs. As former PADD member Greg Sholette (1997:17) recalled, “many of the artists immigrating to the Lower East Side in the mid to late 1970s were voluntary refugees from the managed communities of New Jersey, Long Island or towns in the mid-West or California – places where life’s rough edges and natural disorder had been displaced in favor of the regularity of landscaped yards, shopping malls and parking lots.” This pointed effort to distance themselves from the suburbs is important to note because these middle class, white areas were not simply conservative as a general characteristic, but actually provided a strong base for Reagan’s support, particularly in the South. As political historians, Black and Black (2002) have revealed, sympathy for Reagan and the neo-conservative platform grew as Southern demographics shifted from the largely rural economy with high numbers of black inhabitants to an increase in suburban populations including higher numbers of financially better off whites. “Around cities like Dallas and Houston, Atlanta, Birmingham, Orlando, Raleigh, Richmond, Charlotte, and Greenville, suburbs sprouted relentlessly...Almost every new housing development rising in the suburban and exurban counties of the South represented another potential Republican enclave and a further nail in the Democrats’ coffin.” (Balz and Brownstein cited in Black and Black 2002:6) Areas that eventually became associated with neo-conservative values, as represented by figures like Newt Gingrich, were in fact the affluent, white suburbs – the very ones reviled by artists of New York’s downtown scene.

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founded in synchronic structural and poststructural analyses, and not as a diachronic analysis of the object’s *development* of value.

<sup>22</sup> There was, as stated in chapter 3, the odd exception like Haring or Basquiat. But even they did not benefit from corporate money until at least 1982-83. Rather, it was the neo-expressionist giants like Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl and David Salle who engaged more directly with these sources of capital.



The main oversight by these critics was that these artists supported their practice through a mix of public and private money. Many of the downtown arts organisations received NEA and NYSCA grants which either went directly to the artists, as in the case of Colab, or to exhibitions in which downtown artists participated. Equally, the same artists engaged in independent commercial enterprise. The political nature of artists' practice, then, was not a question of siding with either the public grant system or the commercial sector. Ultimately the political battle being waged, either overtly or implicitly, was one over control – not just financial, but over the very means of production, distribution and reception – a point recognised by several scholars. (Sargeant 1999:14; Hoberman 1981a:34; Hesmondhalgh 1999:37) Allegiances were not split between those who maintained that obtaining money from the state was better and those who thought corporate sources were a better option. Across the board, artists felt that bowing to another's political agenda, be it corporate or the state's, was undesirable to say the least. Beth B typified this attitude. "I don't care where I get the money from, just so long as they don't tell me what I can and can't do with it." (cited in Sargeant 1999:23) Both the grant maintained, public sector arts, and the mainstream corporate giants, were equally viewed with suspicion on the basis of a reflexive understanding of their power. (Buchsbaum 1981:45)

The key point to remember when judging their economic choices as political acts is that such choices were not the most financially rewarding. Although major corporations in all forms of the arts and entertainment industries did slowly attempt to absorb independent production and distribution channels through the 1980s and 90s, downtown cultural producers did not complacently bend to the policies of either state or corporate systems that offered greater monetary reward. Instead, they recognised that "at the heart of politics was the issue of how [cultural products] came to [their] audiences," (Hesmondhalgh 1999:37), and they made a concerted effort to forge their own avenues. Any rejection of corporate or state agendas was equally rhetorical as it was actual, but the real production and distribution avenues forged by the artists afforded them tangible control.

Poststructural critics of the time, however, had a different idea of what was political. They grounded their conception of effective political practice in the text itself. Based on the idea that power rested primarily within the discursive operations of society, emphasis was placed on the capacity of the text itself to subvert the dominant paradigms, particularly those of the neo-conservatives. These critics wanted art to challenge dominant ideologies by moving beyond the 'issues' as presented by the media; an art that would question the political situation through a *textual deconstruction* of media images that were seen to shape reality as it was presented to millions of Americans daily through television, magazines and film. Foster (1985b:155) advised, "art with a politic' which, concerned with the structural positioning of thought and the material effectivity of practice within the social totality, seeks to produce a concept of the political relevant to our present." In other words, the 'issues' of any given day were not worthy of focus if artists wished their work to be effective in the arena of political struggle. Instead it was the underlying social and discursive structures that determined power relations that should be the



object of investigation and attack. Hans Haacke (Siegel 1998b:64), a favourite artist with many of these critics, concurred when he expressed the opinion, "I would not like to restrict so-called political art to topicality. Works that operate as a critique of ideology, without a direct link to a particular political event, should equally qualify...."

The logical conclusion when examining poststructural critics' artistic preferences, then, would be that the political works by groups such as ABC No Rio and PADD would have been critically acclaimed since they engaged directly in challenging conservative ideologies through textual juxtapositions that exposed the underlying capitalist greed of both politicians and landowners. For some critics, like Lippard, they were overtly praised. But surprisingly for many, like Foster, who were critical of the iconoclastic works, these groups did not figure prominently. An explanation for such an omission may be found in the second point of contention over the definition of (effective) political art, and this point of contention was far more fundamental to academic debates of the period.

The approach of many downtown artists, and that of the leftist critics, differed over notions of social reality. For critics influenced by French poststructural theory, reality itself was epistemologically inaccessible and political issues were to be approached with this belief as the basis of investigation. Foster (1985b), in his essay "For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art" contrasted the 'realist' approach of some political art, which he labelled "presentational art" to those which he called "transgressive and resistant modes of political art" based on the belief that any use of 'realism' was both misguided and ultimately politically ineffective. "[F]or when such art seeks most directly to engage the real, it most clearly entertains rhetorical figures for it. In the west today there can be no simple representation of reality, history, politics, society: they can only be constituted textually; otherwise one merely reiterates ideological representations of them." (155) Rather than a common notion of social reality, critics like Foster argued that the dual concepts of 'truth' and 'reality' were fundamentally ideological, and artists who accepted social reality as a given were reproducing its inherent power relations. Indeed, 'reality' was radically different in different contexts (i.e. no universally common realm of reality existed) and so to assume a common reality was in fact to ideologically impose one's own reality upon another.

Many downtown artists, on the other hand, openly stated that their aim was to reach wide audiences. To do just that, they could not engage in abstract epistemological questions when addressing social issues. For them, it made no sense to assume a theoretical position that took away the common basis for understanding. Groups like ABC No Rio and Fashion Moda attempted to address local communities while artists like Wojnarowicz and Scharf targeted their works toward popular culture audiences, not poststructurally-informed academics. Leon Golub, (in Siegel 1998a:61) in speaking about political artists in the early 1980s (PADD and Group Material in particular), and an advocate of political realism himself, explained that "[t]oday the work can be related to ideas which are rampant in the art world and to actual events and circumstances in the 'real' world, so that observers outside that art world find that the work



begins to press in on their worlds.”<sup>23</sup> Such strategies were visible in the work itself. Many downtown artists presented issues in popularly accessible forms using widely understood iconography, like the dollar bill or the flag. They also presented issues in terms of policies, politicians and (usually horrifying) statistics, all of which were forms accessible to the broader public through various media and educational channels. As a result, these artists had to assume a universally accessible social reality in order not to intellectually alienate a non-academic audience who would have been unfamiliar with the epistemic positions of Lyotard, Baudrillard or even poststructural art critics.

So, even though artists and the leftist critics shared a basic antipathy toward the conservative coalition, much of the political work of downtown artists seemed irreconcilable with the prescriptions of leftist critics. However, an investigation of the political context of the time may shed light on why these differences polarised these two groups into neo-conservatives and leftists. Certainly, the heated debate surrounding the political characterisation of these artists is a complex affair and has no singular answer. On one level, the larger structural shifts in political power from liberal to neo-conservative policy makers shaped the nature of this debate. In this regard, one important shift that could be examined profitably occurred in 1981 within the broader American political spectrum. This transition in power centred on the installation and immediate activity of the Reagan administration. Despite the growing discontent amongst Democratic Party members, liberals and leftists, the political alignment of activists of all stripes remained consistent in their placement within the political spectrum up until 1981. However, once the Reagan administration began to implement their neo-conservative policies, all political groups found themselves realigned further to the right. One group of Democrats, for instance, responded to the apparent public support for tax cuts by proposing an economic agenda that favoured tax cuts for the poor, the working classes and small entrepreneurs, cuts supported by higher taxes for corporations. This may have seem quite reactionary, but it was a platform that attempted to keep some measure of redistribution of wealth during a time when the welfare state was being dismantled at an alarming rate.

This shift was not only apparent within the liberal and centrist Democrats. According to Kargar and Stoesz (2000:215), the Marxian left also found itself dragged into the position of defending the status quo of the Democratic Welfare State when they had previously been highly critical. “By focusing its energies on attacking conservative proposals, the left put itself in the unenviable position of defending the status quo of welfare statism, a stance that would have been an anathema 10 years earlier.” And, it is here that we find the writers mentioned thus far, and others at *October* in particular, situated. Tellingly, both Annette Michelson (1981), in her *October* article written to mark its fifth year of publication, and Martha Rosler (1998) in her direct statement “Theses on defunding” published in 1982 cried out over the Reagan administration’s dismantling of the welfare state, not just in the arts through budget cuts, but to programmes that had been aimed at all socially disadvantaged groups.

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<sup>23</sup> To further emphasise the debate over the different approaches to the political in art, the interviews with Leon Golub and Hans Haacke were set up by Siegel in her anthology to facilitate a comparative analysis since both



Significantly, both the downtown artists and the leftist critics can be seen not only as falling within same political hemisphere but also as both struggling to define themselves in relation to the new and mighty political force of the neo-conservative right. One particular political event highlights the point best that these artists were all shades of the fragmented Democratic left rather than agents of neo-conservatism. The downtown scene in New York, mired in internal disputes, eventually united in widespread opposition to the cries for censorship by a true neo-conservative, the Republican senator Jesse Helms. His *direct* attack on artists rather than the indirect weakening of the arts through cuts to funding as was the case during the late 70s and early 80s, provided a rallying point for many artists of seemingly different groups, and indeed provided an avenue of political enablement since it united groups in one coherent political voice that strengthened the artistic community.

As power relations within the Democratic left and the neo-conservative right changed, so too did the confidence and coherence with which artists approached politics. In the mid to late 70s, as the Democratic alliance split and lost the upper hand on national issues, many artists felt limited in their ability to effect political change and expressed much cynicism over the 'purity' of previous images of national unity of the righteous American state. For many, irony was the preferred option for those disillusioned with the seemingly failed political effort of the late 1960s and early 70s. For others, small-scale, focused political campaigns provided another option.

The relative shift of all politics may have been one reason why these artists appeared, at the time, as more to the right than perhaps they were. Left-leaning critics, in their hyper-defensive position after attacks by the likes of Hodsoll, seemed to be suspicious of any stance that was 'less left' than their own, especially any position that smacked of liberalism. To them, such stances appeared to be conservative or reactionary. However, as I will now explore in chapter 6, the term 'neo-conservatism' was more than just a description. It was an insult that became an instrument of power within the micro-politics of the world of art critics.



## Chapter 6

### Team Tactics: Blood, Sweat and Tears on the Critical Battlefield

*Whatever you do, don't mention Kostabi. It'll ruin your academic career.*

Walter Robinson (2002)

The cynical, moneymaking artist of the early 1980s, playing the system through subcultural appropriation, savvy marketing and media manipulation is a vision of the downtown art scene that has endured. This picture is not completely misguided. As we have explored in previous chapters, engagement with subcultures, entrepreneurialism and popular media were fundamental parts of their artistic production. However, the characterisation of the scene as 'neo-conservative', 'reactionary', or 'reaganite' is misleading, if not inaccurate. And yet, such terms continue to persist in discussions of it.

Given the swift and powerful rise of Reagan and the neo-conservatives at the time, the endurance of these terms is hardly surprising. Further, when art production is seen to be necessarily linked to its context, the glasses with which we view this period are bound to be tinted with conservative colours given its overwhelming presence in all aspects of American life. Furthermore, the hype, generated primarily by conservative economists and financial policy makers, had the effect of steering both supporters' and critics' attention towards markets and money in a social environment that was indubitably more complex than simple economics.

These prominent features may be one reason why the artistic period has been characterised as neo-conservative. But as we saw in the last chapter, the community exhibited characteristics that ran contrary to neo-conservative values, reflecting, rather, the same complex ideational dynamic of the liberal/leftist camp. If this is the case, why, then, has such an image persisted, even after the passing of the Reagan era? My argument in the following chapter is that ultimately the characterisation of artists as 'neo-conservative' with its cognate terms, 'Reaganite', 'conservative' and 'reactionary', were indicative not of any true dichotomy of right and left wing within this context but of a power struggle for authority over the art historical definition of the period, particularly amongst critics.

To make this case, first I will briefly outline some historical developments that led to a sense of crisis, particularly with respect to the evaluative authority of critics. This synopsis will be followed by the identification of four groups of critics amongst the cacophony of voices in the struggle for authority - journalists, artists, traditionalists and academic leftists – terms that are used for convenience and as general characterisations. As will become evident, the pluralistic ideological dynamic examined in the macro-politics of the last chapter was also manifest in this micro-political struggle for authority. I will then examine some of the methods and materials available to critics to consolidate their power and transmit their agendas. It will then be shown



that only the latter of the four groups was able to effectively disseminate their accounts through a combination of their institutional roles and corporate agency (understood in the morphogenetic sense) while the other three were constrained in a range of ways that inhibited success in the critical battlefield.

I

What is manifestly evident in the critical literature of the time is a palpable sense of desperation amongst art critics generally. A poll conducted in 1975 indicated that the majority of the American public held little respect for art critics with results varying minimally between regions and level of arts attendance. (Marquis 1991:121-2) And critics consistently remarked on their waning influence in the process of art production and distribution. Artist Martha Rosler (1997:20) saw critics as “brooding over their declining role” whilst Amy Newman (*ARTnews* 1982:55), then managing editor of *ARTnews*, delicately described the situation as “uncertain” at a panel discussion addressing the question “Who Needs Art Critics?”

Historically, the number of critics had been small given that the audience for such writing was limited. The circulation for specialist art publications was minute compared to that of *Life* or *Time*, and only a handful of the publications with large circulation numbers employed full-time art critics. Furthermore, they often did not function separately from the art world itself. Although Clement Greenberg has come under tremendous attack over the past 30 years for his insider involvement, art historian Malcolm Gee (1981:115-125) has described how French art dealers regularly acted as critics, writing reviews of their own artists, and producing and circulating their own publications since the art world was too restricted to sustain separate, independent groups of critics. A similarly small and enclosed world existed amongst American artists, dealers and critics in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where those who had the time, money and education to take an active interest in art were similarly enabled to write critically about their aesthetic interest.

That situation changed rapidly as post-secondary education in the arts was made available through the G.I. bill introduced to accommodate those returning after service during WWII. The net result of the influx of students was a larger percent of the population literate in art and art history than had previously existed, with that number steadily rising. (Crane 1987:9-10; Singerman 1999:6) The effect was two-fold. First, with greater literacy in the arts came greater interest. Attendance for the arts grew concurrently with education, and studies have found education to be the primary factor in attendance with income taking a secondary role (Heilbrun and Gray 1993:44-45).<sup>1</sup> With greater interest, of course, came a greater number of people both

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<sup>1</sup> Heilbrun and Gray have not attempted to argue that education is the sole factor in arts attendance. They also pointed to gender, for instance, as women represent a greater proportion of arts audiences than men. Nor have they denied that income plays a role in arts audience demographics. A strict separation of education and income can be difficult as opportunities for education are often linked to a family's income (44). Certainly those with lower incomes are less likely to attend arts event of some description than those in higher income brackets. However, they maintain that the Ford Foundation study conducted its research in such a way as to provide a convincing case that education is indeed a more influential factor than income in terms of arts attendance.



reading and writing art criticism. The proliferation of art journals, growth in circulation of existent journals, and more popular, less specialised media publishing regularly on art attested to that fact. (Heartney 1997:89)

The education of the arts in university, though, also had the effect of distancing critics from the art world and its processes. Whereas curators and critics could once be characterised as 'impresarios' who were educated through their involvement in art production and distribution, they were taught instead through educational institutions. (Peterson 1986) Their own sense of relevancy to the art production process was therefore viewed as tangential at best. (Stevens in *ARTnews* 1982:59) Also, in previous generations of critics, each individual opinion held more weight relatively speaking since the sheer number of those critical voices was limited. Yet, as those numbers grew, the influence of any one critic appeared to be increasingly diluted, a fact that became ever more apparent.<sup>2</sup>

Feeling marginalized from art production, critics accused the other players in the art world of "ridding everyone concerned of the intellectual middleman" and having "likewise shunned the operations of thought." (*October* 1981:3-4) Eleanor Heartney (1997:67) attributed critics' "vile mood" to their diminished role as "talent scouts." Particular venom was reserved for dealers who were viewed to have usurped the power that critics once held. Martha Rosler (1997:22) saw a decline in the importance of critics in the 1980s as a result of dealers' increased significance. *New York Times* critic Grace Glueck's contention was that "A lot of art today is criticism-proof because it's dealer-made. The dealer already has the artist slotted into art history." (*ARTnews* 1982:56) And, if collectors themselves were writing their own art criticism, as did Doris Saatchi (1982), who needed independent critics? Yet, despite the feeling across the critical board that dealers and collectors had muffled their voices, critics fought *one another* for the power to critically influence art production.

The power for which they were fighting certainly was not economic. Some insider privileges were granted to critics, which, on the surface, had all the makings of a tabloid scandal. Marquis (1991:92-149) has documented cases of 'gifts' being given to critics in return for their critical support. However, few critics made substantial gains in this way. Indeed, many critics hailed from 'comfortable' backgrounds anyway, and art criticism was not the route to fabulous riches. Of course, another potential source of economic power may have been the ability to influence the prices of works themselves, perhaps even of works the critics themselves owned. As Gee (1993:18) has argued, though, the correlation between the market value of works and critical praise is more apparent than real. Little effort is needed to find instances of works or artists praised by critics that went financially unrewarded and vice versa. This is not to claim that there is no connection between the financial success of an artist and critical support/rejection, but rather that success stems neither immediately nor necessarily from the critics. However, unlike Gee's conclusion that lack of economic control equals lack of power, I

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<sup>2</sup> Pearlman (1998: 334) made a similar observation by suggesting a comparison between the (diminished) influence of critics in the 1980s and that held by Clement Greenberg alone.



would suggest that critics did indeed possess some form of power. But rather than a gain in economic capital, critics stood to accumulate prestige (a form of Bourdieu's *symbolic capital*) through scholarly respect.<sup>3</sup> The degree to which this form of capital was prized in earlier critical circles is open for debate, but as art schools' and universities' curricula and agendas merged during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so too did their respective forms of value.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, a critic's ability to be articulate, persuasive, philosophical, and, above all, knowledgeable (rather than, say, poetic, as had been the case for many previous 'belle lettriste' critics (Gee 1993:9-12) became the marker in this newly emerging arena of academic art, by which critics could be assessed and awarded or denied *cultural capital*.

While, the use of symbolic and cultural capital was evident in the micro-political struggles between these groups, a wholesale application of Bourdieu's terminology will not be attempted here since his principal intention was to explain the social functions of the differentiation of high art and mass cultural production. The groups under examination here all operated within the realm of high art, albeit with different visions of how its production and distribution should operate. Although the concepts of symbolic and cultural capital apply, a morphogenetic approach instead would stress the situational logic of elimination that operated within the micro-politics of art world criticism. Since no necessary relations existed between these critical positions, the incentive was to eliminate contradictory opinions, a logic Archer (1995:241) has characterised as "a battleground of ideas."

The metaphor of a 'battleground' may seem a rather strong way to describe the nature of the relationship between critics. Yet by the mid 1980s, there is little doubt that it was viewed as such by the players themselves. Critics from all camps liberally applied the term 'enemy' when referring to those of other critical persuasions, and the ferocity with which critics attacked one another was the subject of comment itself. Critic Eleanor Heartney addressed the broader situation in her book *Critical Condition* (1997), focusing on the varied responses to critics' own "impending irrelevance" (86). Critic Roberta Smith (1984) focused specifically on the nature of the critics' clash with respect to the downtown art scene in her article "The East Village Art Wars." Most critics, however, engaged in a head-on power struggle as they fought to undermine opposing positions.

When examining the downtown art scene in detail, one can identify four groups of critics that appear to have similar interests and approaches and who all engaged in debates about contemporary art of the period. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century certain forums for art criticism have existed, often separated into the categories of the "establish, scholarly journal" and "a

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<sup>3</sup> In Randall Johnson's editorial introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production*, he contrasts Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, which refers to forms of prestige, with cultural capital, which refers to forms of cultural knowledge by which individuals appreciate and understand cultural artefacts, knowledge that tends to be unequally distributed within society. See Bourdieu (1993:7).

<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, art schools had traditionally focused upon craftsmanship. University learning, on the other hand, introduced written forms of problem solving to art-making. A merger of the two produced a university visual arts programme that focused upon work that "addressed...a problem or question, the work as visual research or as critical uncovering." (Singerman 1999:210)



miscellany of reviews proceed on small budgets aimed at a restricted, committed readership.” (Gee 1993:5) As Gee has quite rightly explained, however, more nuanced categories are required to cover the breadth of the art critical literature including “luxury publications and news-oriented journals” and books including monographs and surveys. In some respects, my categories of critics follow Gee’s distinctions. For instance, one group was constituted by journalists and critics who wrote for popular publications with large circulations whilst another was comprised of the more scholarly critics writing for a more academic readership.

But historical specificity is lost if we were to content ourselves with these two categories. As we will see, the university’s integration with art schools, and thus art production, facilitated a new set of critics financed through the institution who represented the (humanities) academic interests and who took a particular oppositional position to conservatism based on an overall leftist stance. They were, of course, distinguishable from the scholarly critics who had followed the more traditional route of support, financed through both museums and commercial channels such as galleries, and continued in the connoisseurial framework. These two subdivisions of scholarly critics I have labelled academic leftist critics and traditional critics respectively.

The final group, whose members emerged from the scene itself, was, like the other groups, not entirely unprecedented in the first half of the century. Artists of previous generations produced all sorts of publications in which they provided interpretations and assessments of their own work. Downtown artist critics, however, were not simply seeking to produce an alternative critical voice, nor simply to enhance the criticism offered by other mainstream professional critics, but, as will become clear, to compete directly with the interpretations on offer from other quarters and to establish their voice as authoritative. As will be outlined, each group, to a lesser or greater extent, exerted some degree of corporate agency based on both a common agenda and a recognition of rival positions.

## II

The journalist or popular critics of the period wrote for a wide variety of publications and so, at first glance, seemed quite different. *Vanity Fair*’s Anthony Haden-Guest, *New York Times*’ Grace Glueck, and the *Village Voice*’s Kim Levin might hardly seem to share a common agenda. However, the nature of the publications they worked for dictated a certain approach that can be found throughout. Most notably, the focus on contemporary art usually had less to do with any commitment to a particular movement, genre or idea in art, but rather was based on the aim to cover the most current trends in the art world. Interest in the ‘here and now’ was often manifested in reviews of current shows, art world gossip, news and current issues. They can be seen, then as *responsive* critics rather than shaping. *The Wall Street Journal* stands as a case in point. During the 1970s, the newspaper’s arts coverage was limited to Fridays, with articles being contributed from time to time by staff covering other beats, such as Meg Cox who began at the paper in 1977 covering commodities markets in Chicago, followed by agriculture in the



mid-west. As the profits of the paper's parent company, Dow Jones, grew during the early 1980s, they extended coverage of the increasingly high-profile art world from once a week to five days a week and created new beats, like the New York-based 'business in the arts' taken on by Cox in 1983. (Cox 2002) Not only did her role require her to follow events rather than forecast or promote, but the entire *creation* of her new role can quite clearly be seen as a response to the increasing interest in the art world. Their coverage of the downtown arts scene was thus simply part of their response to cover what was topical.

Describing their criticism as responsive does not mean that they were not active in the on-going debate about the role of criticism in the art world, nor were they any more 'objective' than any other interested party of critics. They were reflective on their own roles as a group with particular interests as was evident at the aforementioned symposium organised by *ARTnews* where they focused primarily on the state of criticism for a broad audience. Grace Glueck (*ARTnews* 1982:56) outlined what she felt the role of such criticism ought to be when she said,

The ambition is to inform, elucidate, explain and enlighten to the best degree possible. The idea is to help the reader place art in a context, establish where its coming from, what feeds it, how it stacks up in relations to other art, and what its dialectic is with the past. Journalistic criticism should also aim at helping the reader understand why he responds or doesn't respond to the work of art itself.

They also acknowledged and commented upon other critical agendas, often in relation to their own. Kim Levin (1983:28) produced a particularly scathing assault on Hilton Kramer when she called him "the only true hell-fire-and-brimstone villain of the year" and defended fellow critic Lucy Lippard against his "vague accusations of guilt by association" and his rightwing "Joe McCarthy" tactics. Likewise, Mark Stevens (*ARTnews* 1982:56) criticised the academic leftist criticism of structuralists for "puff[ing] themselves up into quite amazing bags of self-importance". Crucially, the academic leftist critics were viewed as obscuring art criticism for the lay reader - the key audience for these critics - through "pompous unclear language". Pointing to identifying features of academic criticism, Stevens remarked: "If you read learned journals, you may have noticed that many critics like to begin articles with quotations, especially from Walter Benjamin. This is an attempt to bless their articles with importance, like cracking a bottle of champagne on the bow of a ship. It is about as important as well." (57)

The traditional critics can be considered the most conservative of all the groups discussed here. Figures like Hilton Kramer<sup>5</sup> and Barbara Rose, with her attempt to reinvigorate Painterly Abstraction in her 1985 show "Fresh Paint" (*Artnet* 2002), were mainly interested in a bygone era of American painting, primarily the post war generation of painters, and emphasised technique and traditional media, particularly painting. Unlike the journalists, they were engaged directly in art historical endeavours, conceptualising and theorising art as a whole. The main thrust of their arguments tended to focus upon the art historical narrative and concepts like

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<sup>5</sup> Kramer began, of course, at the New York Times, leading some historians such as Gee (1993:4), to characterise him as a journalist. Kramer, however, had always taken a more scholarly approach to his criticism and had moved into writing for specialised art periodicals by the late 1970s.



beauty and form. Their supportive interest in contemporary art rested mainly with the Neo-Expressionists who had returned to painting after what many of these critics saw as the “rudderless situation” that emerged in the 1960s and dominated the 1970s. (Frank 1985:40-41) Positive attention was paid to what was emerging from both Germany and Italy, along with ‘homegrown talents’ like David Salle, Susan Rothenberg, Julian Schnabel, Jennifer Bartlett and Eric Fischl, especially since traditional critics saw their beliefs and values echoed in the works of these artists. Downtown artwork, on the other hand, was dismissed as inconsequential at best, miserable trash at worst.

Like the journalist critics, traditionalists articulated their own interests, one in favour of ‘art for art’s sake’, with reference to other critical agendas. Kramer (1984:70-72) specifically stated that he was against the ‘no neutral zone’ argument, putting forth his belief that art could be judged without reference to politics. This idea ran counter to the political position of the academic leftist critics, and the traditionalists knew it. They angrily attacked academic leftist critics for hijacking art, using it as a political tool, and ultimately debasing the standards of quality and craftsmanship that they so treasured. Critical supporters of downtown art, particularly those from within the group itself, were considered no more than ‘cheerleaders’. Furthermore, traditionalists recognised that the developmental art historical narrative that they were engaged in building was a source of conflict with both the academics who, at this time rejected the concept of progress in art, and journalists whose focus on the ‘here and now’ precluded them from establishing long-term support for artists or movements. Robert Hughes (Perl 1990:32), although not as conservative as the others mentioned, showed particular concern for the breakdown of a sense of art historical progress and its relation to those in control of education when he commented: “The thing is that the art audience has been schooled not to like the idea of continuity and slow development.”

Unsurprisingly, traditionalists when in attack mode overlooked differences in the other critical agendas. The downtown artists and their supporters, for instance, were viewed as outright cohorts of the academic left. Not only did Kramer (1984:68) paint the two groups with one brush in his denunciations of the political content of downtown art, but even Carter Ratcliff (1982:11), a moderate critic much more sympathetic to the leftist argument, saw the work produced by several key downtown artists as appealing to “the reliably mechanistic thinkers of *October*” with the most theoretically minded amongst them turning to academic pursuits.

The academic leftist group were composed of a small number of critics that centred largely upon the foundation of journal *October* including Rosalind Krauss and Douglas Crimp, with a few additional critics from *Art in America*, Hal Foster and Craig Owens, and despite writing for the *Village Voice*, Lucy Lippard, who attempted to distance herself from journalistic criticism by integrated academic concepts into her thought and aiming her writing at a “committed and professional audience” (Cash 1994:33-36). This group was interested in the conceptual aspects of contemporary art, concentrating upon the Minimal and Conceptual movements of the 1960s



and 1970s, artists working within what they loosely defined as 'oppositional tendencies', and also photography.

Like the traditionalists, they focused upon the conceptualisation and theorisation of art as a broader project. Despite differences in theoretical approach, "they all share[d] a similar vision of the role of the artist, and they all tend[ed] to support the 'image appropriation' strategy practiced by Robert Longo, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Sherrie Levine, and others." (Frank 1985:39) The lynchpin of this vision was their interest in the context of art, particularly in relation to power relations. They definitively rejected the idealism, and hence the acontextual nature, of art as a 'pure' form. They particularly despaired at the appearance of a traditionalist art as borne out by Neo-Expressionism; "the cultural image of the printer's flatbed, the artist's body, and the great American landscape are fused into an undifferentiated continuum which assimilates one body of work to another in total violation of their particular historical developments." (*October* 1981:125).

Given the academic leftists' agenda, the fact that these critics defined themselves against the traditionalists should be obvious. However, it is worth pointing out that the academic critics viewed the traditionalists as not apolitical, as traditionalists often viewed their own criticism, but as rightwing. This characterisation was based on the argument that the concepts of 'art for art's sake' and the related 'artist as genius' were in fact politically motivated since they preserved the elitist function of art. By promoting the concepts of connoisseurship and universalised 'good taste' that were necessarily tied to particular artists and works, they reinforced a particular art historical canon that excluded marginalized groups and viewpoints. Academic critics observed that, in so doing, traditionalists were aiming ultimately to preserve their own position of power, which was inextricably tied to canonised artists and works.

At the other end of the spectrum, academic critics' accusations against the journalists had less to do with the latter's elitism and more to do with their populism. Journalistic criticism was directly attacked as 'sensationalist' due to its unrelenting pursuit of 'the new'. (Cash 1994:34) A rebuttal against an unnamed critic who slammed *October's* "new formalist campaign – post-Structuralism" accused him of writing nothing more than gossip that "provided yet another extravagant example of the way that reasoned argument [had] become progressively devalued in the practice of criticism – devalued in direct proportion as the giddy pace of collecting...has escalated." (*October* 1981:3) Column criticism, then, was viewed not simply as vapid but as enabling a more sinister capitalist takeover of the art world.

Artist critics were condemned under the same rubric, particularly for emphasising money and glamour and especially for "set[ting] out to mythologize themselves." (Bowler and McBurney 1993:174) Viewed not as simply naïve but as cynical opportunists, the artist critics were seen to be 'reversing' the progressive art of the 1960s and 1970s so favoured by the academic leftists. Deutsche and Ryan (1987:165-166), fervent critics of East Village practices, vehemently and overtly defended the 'advances' made by Minimalists and Conceptualists



against many of the downtown artists and, crucially, their critical supporters. The ultimate charge, as with the previous two groups, was artist critics' supposed inattention to "hard social realities and complex political questions", the key agenda for academic critics. (153)<sup>6</sup>

Despite spending much effort on characterising and analysing both their own position and those of other critics it should be noted that, like the traditionalists, academic leftists had a tendency to lump together all critics that did not share their position. They used vague terms like "the established art media" (Bowler and McBurney:172) and referred to a broad spectrum of art world activity, from downtown art production to auction house inflation as "foolishness". (*October* 1981:4) This characterisation was important, as we will see, in their self-definition as a critical group.

The last of the four groups outlined here is the downtown artist critics. I have labelled them as such since many of them operated both as commentator and artist simultaneously and emerged from the scene itself. Writers such as Walter Robinson, Joe Lewis, Glenn O'Brien and Ann Magnuson equally wrote articles and produced paintings, television shows and performances. Even names recognised mainly as critics such as Rene Ricard, Nicolas Moufarrege and Edit deAk occasionally involved themselves as actors, artists or curators. Even when these critics emerged from different subgroups within the scene (although they frequently crossed subgroup divides), there existed a certain uniformity of voice as evidenced by consistent concepts that appeared amongst all of the artist critics. Terms like 'vibrant' and 'energetic' were common, and its anti-institutional stance, be that institution conceived as a business, the art world or academia, was key. In addition, they felt an independence in their project, one that marked their activity out from that of other groups of both critics and artists. Typically, deAk (1984:56) wrote, "[t]here are so many things we are told not to do that one just has more fun doing them *all*." Walter Robinson (Siegel 1988:179) laid out their objectives more directly. "We made our own art world...as if to prove that anyone could free themselves from institutional authority." The artist critics most important aim, however, was to control the interpretation of the significance of their own work.

As was characteristic with the other groups, artist critics located themselves against other critics, in their case against both the traditionalists and the academic leftists. Certainly, artist critics' differences with the traditionalists need little explanation. Traditionalists represented issues of quality and craftsmanship that were at odds with the artists' vision of do-it-yourself, low-value art production. Furthermore, the traditionalists represented an old school,

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<sup>6</sup> Both articles referred to here focused on the issue of gentrification and express disgust at the actions of East Village artists, dealers and critics for their participation in such an inhumane act. Ironically, however, Deutsche and Ryan were silent on the issue of SoHo's gentrification by the artists they defend as progressive. Even more astonishing is Bowler and McBurney's (1993:168) defence of the gentrification of SoHo by claiming that the area was industrial rather than residential. The reality was, however, that gentrification *did* affect businesses that relied on the cheap rents of the neighbourhood and the proximity of their lower middleclass local workforce. (Zukin 1989:5-6) Once businesses moved away, the local work force, especially the large percentage that had been reliant on the unskilled work on offer from the small manufacturers, were either made unemployed or else forced to move out into the suburbs to follow that job market. Bowler and McBurney's defence of SoHo art practices, then, is perhaps better



institutionalised approach where age and 'wisdom' were admired unlike the youth and innovation prized by the artist critics. More specifically, Kramer vocalised his conservative values, particularly his patriotism, which ran counter to the irreverential attitudes toward nationalism and government of downtown artists. As was made especially evident in chapter 5, the two interests were antithetical to their core.

The relationship with the academic left proved to be more complicated since artist critics believed that the work they represented was in fact progressive. Carlo McCormick (1999:159) described the resentment felt by the group when he wrote, "nothing pissed us off more than the bullshit attacks from the left – from which we may have been alienated but with which we certainly felt a kinship." A sense of common ground was perceived at a basic level and, hence, motivated their anger. Nonetheless, antipathy toward art world 'institutions' was a fundamental part of their stance and was also directed toward those that supported the academic left – namely educational institutions in which art schools had become firmly entrenched. Walter Robinson (1985/85:8) criticised "brainy art critics" accusing them of having "hidden agendas." Edit deAk (1984:55) condemned "these semiotician types" for using their academic language as an intimidation tactic. "It's a means of holding onto power (by sequestering information)....These guys don't really even make the labels, they assign them, consuming prevailing ideas, and, like slot machines, at the drop of an artist's name, at the drop of a slide from a carousel in a lecture, they make them fit into a category."

Indeed, the artist critics supported downtown artists for their anti-intellectualism. Frank and MacKenzie (1987:81,99,101) endorsed performance artists of the 1980s, in contrast to those of the 1970s, for the former's lack of academic inclination, and favourably describe Scharf as avoiding the "Eastern intellectual art-rap game" along with Cutrone as "not overly concerned with intellectual sophistication." Artists too made direct reference to their rejection of the academic leftists as seen in the *Oven Stuffer Bookends* (1982) created by Colab member Debbie Davis; the two bookends, shaped like plucked, supermarket chickens, were photographed holding issues of *October* and texts by Roland Barthes for the group's direct mail catalogue, *Art Direct: Items for the Home or Office*. (Little 2001: 212,407) The catalogue description read, "A decorative food item from the head nurse of Social Med. Hydrostone covered with latex creates a startling chicken skin-like finish. Impress those acquainted with trendy French philosophers by placing your cooked books between these raw ends. Color: chicken skin pink."<sup>7</sup>

Rejection of the academic leftists was not solely because of their institutional affiliation but also due to academic support of Minimalism and Conceptualism, the very movements that downtown artists viewed as stale, over-rehearsed art projects. In addition, such movements formed the mainstay of SoHo fare. Feeling that they had been locked out of SoHo meant that artists' anger extended to the area's favoured movements. With *October* giving up a significant

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understood not as an argument over gentrification but rather a defence of art practices they support. One can conclude from this that these writers are in fact engaged in a debate over art rather than gentrification.

<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank David Little for providing me with the catalogue description. (Little 2003)



portion of its space to the writings of artists like Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt, downtown artists could not help but see the academic leftists who supported such editorial choices as wholly against their interests.

In terms of journalists, artist critics seem to have made little comment. Since they neither rejected them out of hand, nor did they praise them as allies, their relationship can be best described as primarily perfunctory. There is no doubt that artists viewed access to popular publications positively. However, journalistic criticism seems to have been accepted as a means of exposure rather than as an alliance between agendas. After all, downtown critics wanted their own independent voice without being subjected to the whims of publications with other interests. This difference between the two agendas became particularly clear, as we will see, with the decline of the downtown art scene.

The objection may arise at this point that not all critics fit neatly into the categories drawn up here. An insightful study by Peter Frank (1985) included a category of moderates, including Donald Kuspit and Peter Schjeldahl, that have not been investigated here. Certainly some critics aimed toward impartiality within the critical wars outlined above. Roberta Smith (1983, 1984) and Eleanor Heartney (1997), for instance, both published articles that attempted to achieve some distance by equally criticising many of the critical projects pushed forward at that time. Irving Sandler (1984) proved equally ambivalent as he wished to show support for the downtown artists' anti-institutional stance but actually represented the older generation of artists rejected by the downtown crowd.

Several of these critics, although art historically, and even politically, moderate, as convincingly argued by Frank, did not seem to engage in the debate as a group with a shared agenda as did the other ones outlined here. By attempting to extricate themselves from such polarisations, they often 'switched sides' depending on the article, making their critical positions incoherent and ultimately lacking significant force in the debate regardless of their prominence as a critical name.

The four groups' agendas identified here, however, were prominent and more or less self-defined. As with all of the groups, their statement of common aims and the identification and defence against groups with other agendas were key mechanisms for group cohesion. All of their rhetoric, though, was not simply geared toward the consolidation of their position amongst their peers. As has been made evident, each group sought to push forward their own interests as the superior critical position regarding downtown art. Despite a bitter struggle, however, the academic leftists' account came to dominate and shape our retrospective vision of the downtown scene. As we will now see, the group's institutional position and their own agential activity using the means available to them made this domination possible.



### III

Despite the ultimate domination of one group, all groups had methods and materials available to them through which they could both strengthen their own position amongst themselves and transmit their agenda into the critical arena. The most standard methods were, unsurprisingly, conferences, symposia and publications. These three vehicles have been traditionally used by critics in the art world and were accessible to all four groups. The former two vehicles acted as effective methods to articulate, clarify and elaborate upon a common interests amongst its participants and to unify their critical aims. After utilising conferences and symposia as launching pads for such aims, articles were frequently follow-on projects that then acted to disseminate those critical aims from the gatherings of like-minded critics. Other publications such as monographs, catalogue essays, feature-length articles and art historical overviews also provided the opportunities of critics to put their agendas into practice and into the public forum.

The academic leftists seem to have been most active in this regard. The now well-known published series *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, and the collections of essays in *The Anti-Aesthetic* and *Art After Modernism*, were all the result of the conference/symposia-publication process. Furthermore, their publication projects began in the late 1970s and have continued to the present day demonstrating a consistent effort to readjust and reinforce their common aims.<sup>8</sup>

Journalist critics also held symposia, which then resulted in publication, such as the aforementioned *ARTnews*-sponsored event, using the opportunity to outline their objectives as critics responsible to a lay public. Such events, unlike those initiated by the academic critics, were not regular, although the goal of critical accessibility for a lay audience has remained a fairly enduring aim for this group. The most common form of independent publication (that is, not within the pages of a larger media vehicle) for journalist critics seems to have been collected volumes of their criticism. A plethora of these publications have emerged over the past ten years including *Making Modernism* by Kim Levin (1988), *True Colors* by Anthony Haden Guest (1996), and *Post- to Neo-* by Calvin Tomkins (1988). In so doing, these writers endeavoured to maintain the longevity of their critical voice through the rather more permanent medium of books instead of the disposable nature of the publications for which they worked.

Equally, the traditionalists (as one might expect) followed certain traditional routes of art criticism to mark out their vision of the profession. Monographs and large volume art historical overviews provided their most common forums. However, at least with regard to conferences and subsequent publications of a critical project, they appear to have been more *reactive* than *proactive*. Vehicles such as these, intended to reinforce the solidarity of a critical community, do not seem to have existed for this group. Rather they seem to have responded to particular aspects of the academic leftist agenda, such as “art and ideology” or “art and power”, and then wrote in opposition to the leftist opinions.



The 'conference route' was not the path of choice by artist critics since their interests focused upon direct access to their public "[i]nstead of cloistering themselves in self-referential academic communities." (Hager 1986:131) In addition, symposia tended to be organised through formal institutions, their access to which was uneven across the group. However, organisations of artists provided meetings that equally served to reinforce their shared interests and resulted in publications based on the aim of independence. The creation of Moore and Miller's ABC No Rio compendium offers an excellent example. The editors provide a volume that covers not just ABC No Rio, but a range of groups and artists, by coordinating articles and excerpts by artist critics and others within the scene. The edition housed voices as seemingly diverse as Jeffrey Deitch and Glenn O'Brien to Joe Lewis and Tim Rollins and yet extended a vision that originated from within their own community through the editors' introduction and continuity commentary at the beginning of each new article.

Artist critics' choices over publication were affected by their reaction to other forms of critical coverage. These writers focused on providing "serious" critical coverage rather than journalistic reporting, what Robinson and McCormick (1984:141) called "'human interest' stories and pseudosociological examination of shifts in neighbourhood population." Deutsche and Ryan (1987:158-159) understandably blasted them for the level of callousness this statement appeared to imply. However, it seems that rather than concerning the local population, Robinson and McCormick's remark was intended as an insult toward, and a sign of frustration with, critical coverage that refused to focus specifically on the work produced within the East Village.<sup>9</sup> Downtown critics tried to correct what they perceived was an imbalance in critical coverage, and tried to do so through standard art publications such as catalogues, monographs and journal articles.

As is evident, most critics with a particular vision of art that they wished to impart did so through their space in various forms of print. But more significant than one-off publications such as collections of either essays that stemmed from conferences or of critical reviews were those serial publications that provided a consistent forum dedicated to expounding the critics' aesthetic and practical positions. This was often accomplished either through a privileged space reserved for their voice alone, such as Robert Hughes in *Time*, Kim Levin in the *Village Voice*, or Hal Foster and Craig Owens in *Art in America*. There were some critics also who worked on a freelance basis, such as Rene Ricard or Glenn O'Brien, who despite the spread of their discussions in different media vehicles, offered a consistent critical stance. But, what is noteworthy in this particular period is that three of the groups analysed strengthened their agendas through the creation of their own media vehicles, using them to advance their positions and as a forum to argue against rival accounts.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, the discussions on the current state of art criticism in *October* (2002).

<sup>9</sup> Only an emphasis on the war between critics is able to highlight the context for what was otherwise a thoughtless remark at best.



The first to do so were the academic leftists when they created and published the first edition of the journal *October* in 1976. The founders, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, left their positions at *Artforum* to create a forum in which they could set out their terms for 'good art'.<sup>10</sup> At least within the first several years, the editors focused in large part upon Minimalism and Conceptualism and delved into the study of photography. They also used their editorial space, as already stated, for critiques of what they called art world "foolishness" and other publications with agendas characterised as 'conservative'. Furthermore, *October* was also used as a forum for academic critics who viewed downtown art activity negatively, as was evidenced with the publication of Deutsche and Ryan's blistering critique of East Village artists in the winter 1984 edition.

The artist critics also developed their own print vehicles. Precursors to their projects were two very different publications – the dark, cartoonish *Punk* magazine and Walter Robinson and Edit deAk's independent contemporary art journal *Artrite*. However, the different sensibilities of the two converged in the many publications that played a large role in the quest for independence in the downtown scene. There were many that were noteworthy, including PADD's *Upfront*, the audiocassette magazine *Tellus*, Becky Sussler's *X Motion Picture Magazine*, her more successful enterprise *Bomb*, and another Colab project, the *New York Spanner*. Many such publications, although ambitious and often promising, appear to have had niche audiences within the broader scene and some did not last more than a few issues. This meant that as critical vehicles, they were limited in their potential both as sites for consolidation of various artist critics' opinions and their transmission. A central publication to their project, though, was the community newspaper, the *East Village Eye*, launched in 1979 by Leonard Abrams. It had the broadest scope of all the independent serial publications founded at that time and was far more inclusive in terms of downtown artistic activity. Like *October*, the *Eye* operated as a forum in which artists and critics from within the scene could communicate, referring to commonly shared experiences and events and expressing a common support for each other's activities. Writers for the *Eye* also used the newspaper as a vehicle to respond to their rivals' criticisms. Both McCormick (1984b) and Yasmin Ramirez-Harwood (1984) employed exhibition reviews to counter the denunciation of the scene published by Owens in the same year.<sup>11</sup>

Traditionalists also initiated their own publication, albeit later than the rest (a sign of their reactive practice) in the form of Hilton Kramer's *The New Criterion*, which emerged in 1982, funded by the conservative John M. Olin Foundation. The journal remained largely his project, as he set out his terms in the editorial space in the first pages of the journal that he dominated. Nonetheless, a group did revolve around the art historical position it advanced, using space in

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that their reasons for leaving seem to have less to do with power and influence since, according to Marquis (1991:129), "the magazine evolved into such an overpowering critical source that by the early 1970s its staff was called the *Artforum* Mafia." She further explained that "[m]ostly academics, its writers pursued innovative art to its obscure lairs....One of them, Annette Michelson, boasted that the articles were so dense that they read as though translated from the German." This would seem to indicate that Krauss and Michelson had significant opportunity to write as they wished. However, with *Artforum*'s status as a commercial enterprise, they would not have had complete control since financial backers and advertisers would have also held sway in the decisions of the publication.

<sup>11</sup> The nature of these reviews was brought to light by Kirwin (1999:133).



its pages to extol the virtue of favoured artists, and, more importantly, to argue vehemently against what they viewed as an ever-expanding (and thus threatening) left-wing agenda.

These vehicles provided oases of critical security and support in which the writers within each retrospective circle were free to express their views in a forum of mutual support. They also provided maximal editorial control over the critical perspective put forth in each issue. But not all of these forums were restricted to specific agendas. Critics from these groups often wrote for publications that operated outside their own circles. Negotiating different agendas, then, was a significant element to such publications. Journalists, who did not create their own outlet via a journal but continued to rely on other publications, undoubtedly had battles with editors over their writings. Many of the more prominent writers seemed to maintain a degree of control over their voice in print. John Canaday of *The New York Times* and Robert Hughes at *Time*, for instance, refused to pull their punches in their editorials regardless of popular opinion. But even in the case of the former, he was eventually pressured to resign. (Marquis 1991:118-121) Editorial struggles did erupt over the critical appraisal of downtown art and, in certain instances, became open battles, especially when editors hailed from an opposing critical camp. The situation at *Art in America*, where academic leftists Craig Owens and Hal Foster were senior editors, and Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, from the artist camp, were junior editors, provides one such example. The publication of the infamous "East Village Guide" in 1984 by the latter two with Owens' acerbic rebuttal attached at the end possesses particular saliency.

Commissioned to write up a feature on the East Village Scene, then at its height of media hype, Robinson and McCormick did so in what Kirwin (1999:130) has accurately described as an "ironic guidebook pitch", with more than a pinch of humour. This is not to say they were not genuinely enthusiastic about the work they were discussing but rather directed their irony at the act of providing an "insider's guide". The two senior editors decided to counterbalance the unabashed enthusiasm of the artist critics' account with a critique of East Village practices focusing upon subcultural appropriation and gentrification in particular. According to Robinson, however, this decision appears to have been made without consultation with either himself or McCormick.<sup>12</sup>

One effect of such editorial manoeuvring was that Robinson and McCormick were unable to respond within the piece itself to the criticisms put forward by Owens. Robinson has expressed that had he been aware of "The Problem with Peurilism" before going to print, he would have altered the tone and content of the "Guide". However, the result was that Owens' was able to treat the "Guide" as written in uncritical sincerity thereby nullifying Robinson and McCormick's tongue-in-cheek inflections, effectively altering the reading of their piece. Indeed, Kirwin appears to be a lone voice in recognising its irony, which is otherwise quite evident through their tone. Furthermore, by positioning the critique in the same issue and immediately following the "Guide", Owens effectively had the final word. If the editorial intention was to provide two differing critical perspectives on East Village art, in practice Owens' piece emerged



as the clear winner. Such manoeuvrings were facilitated by positions of editorial power and can be seen as one tactic in the struggle between critical groups at the intra-institutional level.

Outside of publications, a significant source of power lay in the key positions held by critics on the committees that decided the allocation of public funds as well as their relationships with those heading funding bodies. Struggle over the control of NEA funds serves as an excellent example of how this power could shift from one group to another. During the 1970s, many academic leftist critics, including Lucy Lippard, Peter Plagens and Rosalind Krauss, held committee positions and received funds from other NEA committees, particularly those which allocated grant to critics through the Critics' Fellowships Programme. (Gever 1983:3) With the liberal, hands-off approach taken during the seventies by NEA chair Nancy Hanks and the democratically-minded approach of her successor, Livingston Biddle, these committee members increasingly aimed to implement a politically progressive policy toward the funding of various groups of marginalized voices, particularly women, and 'popular' arts such as photography and jazz. (Galligan 1993) The result was that funds were increasingly channelled into areas of concern prioritised by the liberal agenda of both these critics and Biddle himself.

The inclusion of groups traditionally outside the established peer system into the process caused institutional strains since they increasingly challenged the control held by the peer review panels. Questions were then raised about the degree to which the panels were 'closed' and subject to insider influence. However, the election of Ronald Reagan and the subsequent replacement of the chair by the conservative Frank Hodsoll meant that this identified need for change in the review process coincided with the acquisition of control by proactive neo-conservatives. What might have been a broadening of the review process to further accommodate multiple liberal positions was instead transformed into a political battle between right and left.

As such, Hodsoll aimed to implement his own programme that predictably matched Reagan's overall economic policy – slash budgets, dramatically increase private sector involvement, and promote wholesome and patriotic values. He took this task upon himself personally, and unlike Hanks and Biddle, saw that all funding applications passed through his hands, using his veto power to an unprecedented extent. He also supported the bid to reduce the budget by 50 percent and to suspend the critics' fellowships. Most importantly, he was not simply an outsider Reaganite imposed on the system. He had significant support from traditionalists within the art critical world, such as Hilton Kramer, Samuel Lipman, Ruth Berenson and perhaps unwittingly through his report into the Critics' Fellowship Programme, John Beardsley.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Robinson's account of events is relayed in Kirwin (1999:131-132).

<sup>13</sup> I say unwittingly because it appears from subsequent comments made by Beardsley that he had not intended for funding to be suspended. He did feel that there was an overabundance of what amounted to academic leftist insider activity in the NEA. However, his recommendation was to direct money toward journalist critics instead, since he felt



These activities were undertaken with the overt belief that the public money dished out under the previous chair was used specifically to fund liberal/leftist agendas. Gever (1984:37) pointed out that both Kramer and Lipman, both openly directed their actions toward the “enemy within’ the arts endowment.” More specifically directed toward critics, Kramer wrote in 1983 (4),

My own impression...is that a great many of [the fellowships] went as a matter of course to people who were publicly opposed to just about every policy of the US government except the one that put money in their own pockets or the pockets of their friends and political associates. In this respect, it is worth noting that there seemed to be an annual fellowship reserved – unofficially no doubt – for one another writer for *The Village Voice*.

Not only did he directly accuse liberal and leftist critics of lining their own pockets, specifically targeting the *Voice*, but did so by invoking the typical neo-conservative appeal to patriotism that they claimed their enemies lacked. By directly attacking academic leftist critics via fellowships and funding, traditionalists like Kramer aimed to do nothing less than cut off what they viewed as the liberal lifeline.

The acrimonious fallout over NEA funding highlights just how important each group felt institutional control was to their agenda. After all, the positions of these committees, the allocation of funds, were not simply symbolic or discursive, and, as was shown in chapter 1, underscore the need to methodologically distinguish institutional structures from ideational systems. They controlled the flow of public monies to the arts, which had direct material repercussions. The painter and theorist Thomas Lawson (1984:91) wrote that the situation was “serious....The strenuousness with which he [Kramer] attacks his foes is amplified by his proximity to the channels of power, putting him in a position to do real harm.”

In fact, if one were to focus solely on the clamour generated over the issue of NEA funding at the time, one may conclude that therein lay the ultimate source of power, with access to the media coming in a close second. However, the shift in the balance of power from the academic leftists to the traditionalists over NEA funding was not the ultimate deciding factor in the critical wars. Rather, a multiplicity of structural conditions gave the academic critics a distinct advantage to enact their agenda over the other groups discussed here.

#### IV

It may seem strange for readers to think of the academic leftist writers as dominant. Certainly, to make this claim is undoubtedly contentious. For one thing, all of the groups, as has been indicated above, equally defended and attacked as if their sheer survival was at stake. The artists, for instance, felt under siege from both the traditionalists and the academic left. Robinson (Siegel 1988:182) stated: “The art world mounted a unified attack. Look at the list of people who slagged us off in print: Gary Indiana, Barbara Haskell, Robert Hughes, even *October* magazine chimed in.” The traditionalists saw the art world as overrun by leftist criticism, as was

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they worked for the public. He did not appear to have traditionalist critics in mind. For his comments, see Gever (1983:3).



evidenced monthly in *The New Criterion's* editorials. The academics pointed to a "climate of growing reaction", which they maintained was smothering an alternate viewpoint to neo-conservatism. The journalists were especially defensive about deteriorating into mouthpieces for the highest bidder whilst accusing both the left and the right of elitism.

Significantly, Hales (1989:21) has indicated that by the early 1980s, "*October* had moved firmly from the margins to the center of the art critical world." A broader public perception also existed that it was increasingly the case that "smug PhD types deciding what art is." (Cummings as cited in O'Hagan 1998:11) Evidence that the academic agenda did indeed take center stage can be found in the numerous art historical surveys of art after World War II that have emerged in recent years. When discussing the late 1970s and early 1980s, authors have consistently included and examined at length artists endorsed and examined by the academic left camp, such as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer, whilst those who were condemned or simply ignored, artists like Scharf, Magnuson and Hambleton, appear cursorily if at all, despite their relative success at the time. Pearlman (1998:188) made a similar observation with regard to Keith Haring. She noted that, "Since the rise of anti-modernism in cultural theory, Haring has been left out of theoretical discourse on contemporary culture to a surprising extent. The omission is noteworthy because Haring is arguably the most widely-known American artist since Andy Warhol."

Evidence of the academic leftist legacy also exists in the notable art historical absence of artists initially endorsed by this group but then were either dropped or never extensively discussed. Sandler (1996:390) recounted in his survey, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, a notable decline in interest in the artist Sherrie Levine after she moved in 1989 to the Mary Boone Gallery. Robert Longo, too, seems to have suffered a similar fate after initial praise from the academic critics when he increasingly moved into the entertainment industry as a director of music videos and a film in 1995. For instance, not only does his work not appear in Brandon Taylor's introductory survey of contemporary art (1995), but after significant endorsement by Foster in the early 1980s, he is not so much as mentioned in *Return of the Real* (1996). Groups such as PADD and ABC No Rio were simply dropped from art historical surveys despite initial support from the academic critics. Owens, for instance, did praise their political work within the East Village. However, none of these critics demonstrated any long-term commitment to these groups. The groups' images were used to illustrate a few articles, such as "The Problem with Peurilism", but were never discussed any further, nor were the groups the subject of serious art historical or theoretical investigation. By contrast, the work of Group Material, a group more overtly interested in questions of 'art' not incidentally (Hall 1983/84:3), had consistent support from academic critics and has consequently made a greater number of appearances in art historical surveys than do other collectives.

To claim that the academic critics had a hand in the break up of the downtown scene, as will be outlined shortly, would simply be untrue. But it goes without saying that their choices of which artists to endorse and which to reject were deliberate, and the fact that many of the



artists in the downtown communities worked against the interests of the academic camp must raise questions concerning the reasons for the latter's evaluative decisions. To begin, these artists did not consider academia as their viewership, preferring local communities or popular audiences. In order to engage with such audiences, they were deliberately anti-intellectual and accessible unlike the critical approach favoured by the academics. As critic Kay Larson (1983:87) has argued, "‘post-studio’ art, which downgrades craft, remains firmly entrenched in the academic world – due, perhaps, to the fact that the university values teaching of craft less than the transmission of ideas." Art that was anti-intellectual, then, was hardly likely to gain favour amongst those for whom 'ideas' were paramount.

Another conflict of interest was over formalism. Although a range of critics increasingly voiced a rejection of Greenbergian formalism, Hales (1989) has convincingly argued that questions revolving around medium specificity remained at the heart of the academic project, taken up especially with reference to photography. The downtown artists, however, showed little interest in ontological reflections on their medium, unlike Minimalists and Conceptualists who focused on the material or immateriality, as the case may be, of the work. Indeed, downtown artists specifically rejected the focus of attention of the previous generation of artists. This rejection, consequently, provided a double-barrelled attack on the academic emphasis upon medium specificity, since not only did artists move away from media-based investigations but did so as a deliberate disavowal of the very movements favoured by the academic leftist critics.

The conflict over the nature of art's project becomes particularly evident when investigating the rift between critics. Thomas Lawson (Siegel 1988:216), although considered a Neo-Expressionist, expressed the view of many downtown artists when he stated that by the mid-1970s, "the late minimal hegemony had become intolerable." The editors of *October* (1981:4), on the other hand, labelled the downtown art practices (without directly naming them) "foolishness" and demonstrated their support for the minimalist and conceptualist work discussed in their pages by "direct[ing] our attention instead to what we felt was most positive and serious in the practice of contemporary art, its theory and criticism." Further, Deutsche and Ryan (1987:166-168) vigorously defended these art projects as progressive against the 'regressive' East Village art practices.

The reasons for this conflict become clearer once one takes into account the origins of Minimalism and Conceptualism in the university. Acknowledged as being the case in several quarters, two key reasons for such a connection can be identified. The first, made by MoMA's then Director of Painting and Sculpture, William Rubin, (cited in Larson 1983:86) was that an art historical "consciousness" was necessary not only for the appreciation of such art but for its very creation. In other words, artistic projects that reflect upon and respond to the philosophical and historical developments of art require substantial understanding of the meanings for not only their own work but for the larger avant-garde project. The development of these informed perspectives on art and the art-making process were undoubtedly tied to the academic project of reflective investigation. The second reason, this time highlighted by art historian, Howard



Singerman (1999:157-162), was financial. Artists not only needed expensive equipment, such as that required for large-scale installations or video works that was inaccessible to them without a large-scale institutional budget to purchase it. They also often relied on personal income from the university since they produced works that could not be sold as usual art objects.<sup>14</sup> Not only did universities often commission works and show them within their own institutional galleries, but they sponsored practitioners as visiting artists and as permanent staff. By rejecting the minimalist and conceptualist movements then, downtown artists were rejecting the academic institutions' own product.

Likewise, embracing the entire downtown scene would have involved a fundamental conflict of interest for academic critics since by endorsing downtown art, they would have equally endorsed an art-making process that rejected their own academic involvement. Their interest in contemporary art, however, meant that some artists were recognised. But rather than being understood within the downtown context, those chosen artists were plucked from what had been a far more cohesive and interconnected community than was ultimately depicted by such criticism. What has since been passed down through the academic art historical surveys, then, is not the world of Hager (1986), Frank and McKenzie (1987) or Moore and Miller (1985). Instead, we are presented with a few individual artists who appear to be rebelling against their own supposedly neo-conservative artistic community.

Just how this art historical vision came to predominate is worth examining. After all, each group of critics had seemingly solid, and even formidable, avenues to transmit their positions. The key, however, to which we will now turn our attention, lay within each group itself. The institutional structures within which the journalists, artist critics and traditionalists all worked had limiting weaknesses. But as cultural economist Bruno Frey (2000:14) remarked about arts organisations, "[t]he better these groups are organized, the stronger their influence." The same could be said for critics.

Journalists and critics for popular publications did seem to have a strong basis for art historical influence given their access to large readerships through media publications. Certainly writers for the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* were bound to reach much more of the population than those for *Art in America* whose circulation was a paltry 50,000 in 1984. (Kirwin:111n5) In this capacity, they certainly had a hand in fuelling the hype of the art scene through celebrity lifestyle-type articles of all art world participants, including other critics<sup>15</sup>, and sensational headlines, like the 1989 cover of *Time* with the words "Art & Money" splashed across the page in large, bold lettering.

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<sup>14</sup> Although, as was discussed with reference to Land Art in chapter 3, collectors of these works can and do exist, and aspects of the work have been valued on the market and sold at auction. Equally, their prices, like those of other artists, increased with the art market boom of the 1980s.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting here that members from *every* art world quarter were subject to celebrity-style interviews, including the academic leftist critics and their favoured artists. Despite the derision heaped upon the 1985 New York Times Magazine feature on Basquiat, Barbara Kruger, for instance, was featured in *ARTnews* in 1987, and both Douglas Crimp (Druckey 1990) and Fredric Jameson (Stephanson 1986/87) had their own features where the main focus, despite the intellectual slant to the questions, was to promote their individual importance. The posed studio headshot in the case of the latter makes this point especially evident.



However, these avenues were not conducive to long-term historical respect since critics in this medium had to adhere to popular media conventions. For instance, they catered to an audience who they had to presume knew little about art. This meant that their references to art history had to be broadly recognisable ones. In other words, they had to rely on an art history that had already been generated in order to draw the reader in, otherwise, the reader would not have any entry point into the assessment presented by the critics. In addition, the popular media tends to focus upon 'current' issues and requires all writers to move along with the most current trends. These critics, equally, were required to remain topical and provide readers with the latest developments in the art world. Unlike the critics of *October* who could "ignore" (in their own words) whatever aspects of the art world they wished, journalists and popular media critics were required by their publications to discuss what 'everyone else' was discussing in order to remain topical and sell copies. Such a stipulation was not conducive to long-term art historical commitment since new foci of attention were constantly generated.

Nonetheless, discussing downtown art in a unified manner may have still laid the groundwork for the future art historical accounts and critical interpretations. But achieving that unified voice was institutionally hindered for journalist critics. Whilst this group did identify a broad set of common goals, namely "to inform, elucidate, explain and enlighten" (Glueck in *ARTnews* 1982:56), those goals were ultimately constrained by the editorial directive of each individual publication. The criticism on offer would necessarily differ between, say, *Vanity Fair*, *Time* and the *Village Voice*, which were all catering to different readerships. As a result, journalistic critics, although recognising certain common goals, could not generate a comprehensive and long-term programme since each critic was individually constrained by the mandate of his or her own media vehicle. Each article, consequently, set forth an individual agenda for the publication they represented, ultimately compromising any wider agenda that bound such critics together.

Artist critics, more so than the journalists, were more proactive in articulating their common interests through effective community support networks and through a blurring of lines between the roles of the artist and the critic. As a result, the interests of the two roles came together in television programmes, magazines and catalogues that were artist-produced. Critics were given space and, often, a hand in production, to put forward their agenda simultaneously with/as artists within these media works. In addition, they were not only limited to internal products but could appeal directly to mass media publications using their positions as insiders. As a result, these critics not only had a means of production for their own criticism, but, driven by their desire for direct public appeal, they could reach non-professional audiences as well.

As with the journalists, their media vehicles had certain constraining limitations. Publications like *X Motion Picture Magazine* or *Upfront* and programmes such as *Potato Wolf*, *All Color News* or *Party TV* were often too specialized and too self-referential to appeal to many outside their own communities. Even so, they nonetheless had the effect of reinforcing



community unity. Smaller, focused publications performed this function well since their messages were precise, targeting well-defined readerships. However, when these publications did aim to branch out to a wider audience, as did Becky Sussler's *Bomb*, which took a broader sociocultural outlook (Siegel 1988:3), they diluted their commitment to one group of artists as well as a long-term art historical project, emphasising instead the latest in the art world. Added to that, the artists critics who did branch out into established media avenues outside the community were equally constrained by the same need to extend their coverage to both a wider range of art and, particularly as downtown art became 'old news', newer developments in art that lay elsewhere. If the critics did not widen their own critical parameters, the interest in reading their views would wane in contrast to others representing a new and ascendant art movement, – Peter Halley, a Neo-Geo artist and critic, was one such figure.

Although these constraints were bound to have an effect on the group's long-term critical project, group cohesiveness could have steered them through the rough waters. But several factors severed the connections between the different subgroups and individuals, not least of all, success. Those who prospered as artists beyond the confines of the community tended to attract the scorn of those who had not, as was evident when Keith Haring, one of the most visibly successful artists from the downtown network, was the victim of a 'tar-and-feather' attack outside Tony Shafrazi's gallery. (Fig. 36) The division between successful and unsuccessful was further fragmented by splits within the successful themselves depending on the *avenue* of success travelled. As Robinson (1985/86:8) has noted, some, such as Haring, Scharf and Basquiat, gained their prestige through success with collectors and in auction houses. Others, such as Holzer and Karen Finley gained their prestige through popularity with academic critics. Ultimately, the effect of tying success with the interests of those who were at the source of one's success had the effect of, at least partially, shifting their allegiances away from the goal of community coherence.

As artists refocused their attention away from the community, the downtown networks opened up to those previously shut out, particularly SoHo art world players. The movement of artists was not unidirectional from the East Village out into SoHo. SoHo artists began to show in the East Village as "guest artists" further breaking the allegiance of downtown artists. (Siegel 1988:8) The agenda of artist critics was simply not appropriate or even applicable to SoHo artists. Moreover, this influx brought critics who were already connected to the SoHo art world, squeezing out artist critics by nullifying their role for articulating the ideas and beliefs that lay behind their community's cohesion. As the two art scenes began to mix, the artist critics saw their identity, formed in opposition to the SoHo art world, splinter and fade. Their power to shape the long-term vision of their own movement was seriously compromised as the initially formidable front built through the interweaving of artistic and critical agendas broke down.

The agenda of the traditional critics seemed, for a while, to be the one most likely to predominate, given that from the mid-1970s neo-conservatism took hold in many aspects of American social, cultural, economic and political life. Aside from the increasing strength of the



conservative programme during the 1980s, certain factors lent weight to the belief in the strength of the traditionalists' agenda. In terms of the arts, forms favoured by traditionalist critics were on the rise with the production and prominence of 'expressive' and figurative painting, first from Germany and Italy and then from America. These critics then had a subject about which to write, spreading their voice across a range of scholarly articles, monographs and art historical texts. More ominous was their influence over the allocation of NEA funds, as has been discussed. Their conservative programme seemed to lurk in every corner.

However, two major factors worked against the possibility of their position predominating. The first was that even with a resurgence in figurative and expressionist painting, they were just too conservative for any group or institution interested in innovative contemporary art to take seriously. Aside from the obvious political antagonism, those from the more 'liberal' camps simply ridiculed their viewpoints and tastes in art as out dated and backward. Kim Levin (1983:28), for instance, includes Hilton Kramer under the *Village Voice's* "Heroes and Villains" column deriding his definition of 'postmodern' "as a return to a premodern, pre-Raphaelite Eden." Lawson (1984), too, mockingly entitled his editorial tirade "Hilton Kramer – An Appreciation", characterising him as rear-guard by calling him a "fire-eating neo-conservative" who did not so much as entertain "progressive ideas". Nor did traditionalists themselves show any interest in sifting through downtown art as much as rejecting it out of hand. Their contribution to the debate over downtown art was nothing more than a dismissal that was not likely to make any impact on the long-term evaluation of the scene, especially since their project to reinstate traditional forms over innovative ones was antithetical to the entire practice of contemporary art that aimed to challenge previous art forms.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the collectors and institutions with whom such critics would have favour would be those with traditional tastes, and not those looking to support the most current and challenging trends. Their opinions on the downtown art scene were simply not sought or seriously considered amongst those who were interested in questions over the production of 'avant-garde' work.

The traditionalists' lack of critical weight with respect to innovative art affected their ability to make as big an impact in NEA funding as they would have liked. One NEA mandate, developed and entrenched over its first 15 years of existence, was to support new and challenging work that did not have the funding possibilities that larger more established organisations did. Such a policy was not easily dismantled, despite the best efforts of Frank Hodsoll. He only managed to overturn 20 of some 10,000 decisions made, and his bid to cut the budget in half was limited to 10 percent. Indeed, many sociologists and critics remarked how little the neo-conservative agenda was able to affect the NEA budget and funding decisions.

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<sup>16</sup> Lest this statement be misinterpreted, I am not trying to make a claim about the avant-garde nature of downtown art work. Rather, I am merely pointing out that the voice of the traditionalists did not hold any weight in the vigorous debates that were occurring at the time over the 'avant-garde-ness' or progressiveness of this type of art production. For an in depth analysis of these debates, see Pearlman 1998:ch.1.



(DiMaggio 1986a; Gever 1983; Pear 1983)<sup>17</sup> Groups like Fashion Moda continued to receive NEA funds throughout the 1980s despite the objection by traditionalists.

The second reason why this group were unable to effectively disseminate their critical mandate was that they simply did not act in a coordinated manner, a hallmark of corporate agency, which would have facilitated their ability to introduce changes according to their agenda. They did not appear to have held their own conferences nor did they publish collectively to any great degree. One reason for this may be due in part to their adherence to individualism, both for artists and for themselves. The concept of speaking with a collective voice simply did not fit in with their individualist ideology. Their critical agenda did not, of course, break down as it did for the artist critics. They have continued to publish through a variety of media vehicles. Nor did the number of those arguing for the rejection of downtown art as perverse and un-American decrease, unlike the journalists' whose interest in putting forward a comment upon the downtown scene disappeared with shifts in artistic fashion. Unaffected by changes in numbers or opinion, the inability of these writers to stamp their authority decisively on the art historical understanding of the downtown scene resulted from an insufficient coordination of their corporate agency.

My claim here is not that the conservative critics were uninterested in such a project. They had active aspirations to shape and define art production and art history and have produced several stalwart texts not easily dismissed. The blanket dismissal of all art produced in the downtown scene by the traditionalists certainly contributed to the ease with which many of the artists were written out of art history. After all, conservatives exerted strong influence in maintaining many figurative and expressionist artists who other critical groups would rather have seen expunged from the critical canon. However, their voices were not the ones that *shaped* the retrospective vision of the downtown scene despite the broad belief that at the heart of this artistic activity lay neo-conservatism. Or, rather, *some* of the activity. And, to understand how the lines were ultimately drawn between progressive and regressive downtown activity, one must turn to account advanced by the academic leftist critics.

Art historians Ann Bowler and Blaine McBurney (1993:176-179) made a plea for the critical revisitation of the neglected downtown scene. Their project was ultimately to launch their own investigation into its different participants and the work these artists produced, thus rediscovering work that had been, in their eyes, forgotten. Their suggestions for positive analysis and further exploration were Group Material, ABC No Rio, PADD and Colab. Their suggestions for critique and rejection were Kenny Scharf and writer, Tama Janowitz. Now it *is* the case that many of those artists listed have not been taken up by art historians in the longer term. Yet their examples of 'rediscovered' artists are strikingly familiar. What becomes evident upon reflection is that these recommendations were not novel since they reiterate the common examples used within academic leftist critiques of the period, pitting the former, characterised

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<sup>17</sup> A larger impact on the NEA came from 'moral majority' figures like Jesse Helms in the late 1980s and early 1990s rather than the neo-conservative arts critics of the previous decade.



as progressive, against the latter, painted as reactionary. This standard dichotomy appeared as early as the late 1970s through the writing of Lucy Lippard.

Bowler and McBurney's article, although aiming to challenge the blanket condemnation of the period, did not question what was, by that point, an already established division. Indeed, their characterisation of a complete critical dismissal of this art is not an accurate one since, arguably, the only group to so completely dismiss the period were the traditionalists. Bowler and McBurney's argument, however, seems directed at academic art historians rather than conservative critics. But, academics had already established certain preferences that fell within the choices by Bowler and McBurney (for instance, Group Material and key Colab figures) whilst rejecting the rest. Rather than substantially challenging the art historical account of the period, Bowler and McBurney's analysis reaffirmed the academic critics' assessment of the period, ultimately reinforcing their own support for that account. Their analyses of Scharf and Janowitz appear to be driven by a broader tendency in academic art historical practice to highlight the conservative and capitalist interests in art and examine their influences on production, distribution and, above all, meaning. Although these lines of investigation are undoubtedly valuable ones, they are, nonetheless, specifically academic in nature that tie their article into the broader agenda of the academic critics discussed here, one that aims to sift out the progressive from the regressive.

An assumption that often underlies these investigations, importantly, is that such forms of analysis derive from marginalized voices since they supposedly challenge rather than reinforce the hegemonic art world. Frank (1985:41), for instance, predicted the marginalisation of the academic leftist position after the publication of *The New Criterion* but commented that "many leftists seem not uncomfortable with that position and may be content to assume it." Hales (1989:7) described the agenda of *October's* editors to make it an "outsider journal...." The editors themselves reinforced this assessment when they accused everyone from the *New York Review of Books*, *Salmagundi*, *The New Yorker* and *Partisan Review* to "major academic institutions" as composing "an anachronistic, self-perpetuating hegemony." (*October* 1981:122) This self-serving image was of a lone voice battling against the mammoth weight of the almighty establishment. This self-image, though, swayed by the struggle for critical dominance, was not accurate, nor was it informed by a reflexive understanding of their own institutional dominance.

Of course, these particular academics were not anomalous in this lack of self-reflexive commentary. On occasion, acknowledgement has been made of art historians' role in advancing artistic careers. Reference may even be made to our roles as the writers and purveyors of art history itself. This has been routinely done in the effort to expunge what are perceived to be conservative values from the field. Rarely is it done as an introspective look at our own power relations within the art world, as Francis Mulhern (1995) has done in his investigation of the politics of cultural studies. Michael Leaman (1997:13) made this same observation when he commented, "[t]hose who write about art, whether in the form of its history or criticism,...have avoided reflection on the social and cultural politics of their own writing



activity." An important point that has been obscured by this lack of self-reflection has been the benefit derived by academic leftist critics of the late 1970s and early 1980s from their institutional and cultural positions within the art world, from their standing within the humanities as a discipline and from their broader position within the social hierarchy, which, taken together, enabled them to effectively advance their political agenda.

The main source of power came from their institutional placement within academia and its authoritative level of intellectual prestige. (Pearlman 1998:211) As such, specific avenues were available to them through which that power could be exercised. The first was access to the long-term institutional transmission of art history. Use of this avenue was possible in several respects. Most obvious was their hand in the writing of contemporary art history and its transmission to new generations of scholars through academic publications and students (and future scholars) in terms of teaching and reading lists. By providing comprehensive scholarly writing on contemporary art, these academic critics became the foremost authorities within the university institutions.

But academic influence was more wide-reaching than just on those training as art historians. They also had influence over artists and art production. As art schools increasingly merged with academic institutions, particularly after WWII, the focus of study shifted as the two curricula merged. Whilst the university incorporated studio-based classes taught by professional artists, students were also required to learn art history and theory. The relation between art historical movements and the work of students was then made manifest and perhaps, as was proposed by Marquis (1991:45), actively encouraged. Investigating in further detail, Singerman (1999:ch.7) suggested that the educational emphasis for art students has shifted away from the practical aspects of craft development to center attention on the academic project of theoretical and historical investigation, for a number of reasons including federal funding requirements. In other words, emphasis has been placed on the process of hypothetical question and answer, using art as one line of inquiry.<sup>18</sup>

The implication is that art students have become more reliant on art historians and theorists in their developing vision of art. Academics have played a pedagogic role for art students, passing on their own ideas and critical agendas that then impact on artists' own understanding of their place within art production and even on the art production process itself. This line of access to artists and their production was particularly effective for any dominant group wishing to transmit a particular agenda concerning art, and, was most available to academic critics given their university affiliations.

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<sup>18</sup> A look at one class offered in the Concordia University's Fine Arts department, based in Montreal, will serve to illustrate this point. In a full-year studio-based class on 'installation' offered in 1993/94, taught by a practicing conceptual artist, students were given three bound readers of excerpts from texts (including Roger Fry, Clement Greenberg, Andreas Huyssen, Lucy Lippard and Yvonne Rainer) that charted the history of installation practices and its theoretical issues. These were read and discussed over the first semester, after which students each produced an individual installation. In the second term, students then discussed these works in relation to the readings done in the first semester, producing another installation at the end of the second term. Hardly the exception, this class illustrates the overt relationship between academic inquiry and art production in university art training.



Academia also possessed integral links with museums. Many academics, not least of all those from the *October* crowd, have written critiques, some very compelling, of museum practice. But, the implication is often that the two institutions, academia and the museum, were indeed worlds apart with the focus remaining fixed on corporate and state influence and control. However, a shift in museum direction occurred when the bureaucracy of the 'arts administrator' took over from the old-style arts 'impresario'. (Peterson 1986) And with that shift came a transformation in their educational backgrounds. Whereas the art history propounded by the impresario had been shaped by friendships built with influential collectors and dealers, the arts administrator was the product of academic programmes, the first *postgraduates* enrolling in 1966 at both Yale and Florida State University. (165) Other related programmes such as those centred upon curating and museum studies also emerged. In all cases, their knowledge of art history was transmitted academically, often focusing upon the same readings and writers by art historians and even artists.

Furthermore, the policies of museums and academic institutions became more closely aligned as the role of the museum was redefined in terms of its educational capacity. In order to justify public funding of arts institutions in the Tax Reform Act of 1969, museum directors strengthened their educational facilities. (DiMaggio and Useem 1978:377) The NEA, too, defined its aims with respect to education, thus encouraging arts organisations to match their objectives to those who held the purse strings. (O'Doherty 1976:69) In order to achieve this match of objectives, museums have offered lectures, symposia, and school tours. Such educational sessions, crucially, were either given by those same arts administrators taught in academic programmes, or else by academics themselves. In addition, academics continued to be involved in curating, writing catalogue essays, providing expert advice and participating as members of museums. Although such activities automatically bring the traditionalists (who tend to follow in the footsteps of the old-style self-taught and connected 'independent' critics) to mind, Hales (1989:22) has called attention to the fact that academic leftists were equally engaged as was, for instance, Rosalind Krauss with the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

Of course, all of these avenues of transmission were open to any number of academics with different ideological agendas. After all, academics did not all operate within the remit of one unified vision, and these avenues alone did not necessitate success for the academic leftist critics under consideration. However, two more aspects of the institutional affiliations of this particular group favoured their agenda over those of other academics.

The context of their ideas set within broader theoretical shifts within the humanities was one such aspect. MacDonald (1994:120) summarised these changes with reference to literary studies as having "moved away from a gentlemanly tradition of scholarship toward a more political focus, rather than toward more professionalised and cumulative knowledge making." Such a shift away from the connoisseurship of the past (and equally away from *scientific*



knowledge-making forms) to a socially and politically engaged form of academic writing was characterised by the widespread interest in key structural and post-structural theorists, such as Althusser, Lacan and Foucault, who were named by Iverson (1983:497) in her adulatory review of the *October* project, as important theoretical pillars to their work.<sup>19</sup>

David Carrier (1989:36) has commented that “the real story of art criticism in the 1980s is less about writers than about some widely-shared ideas...” The fact that the poststructural ideas of a few key authors were championed across different disciplines within the humanities meant that those viewpoints had a broad base of support. Gaining such a strong historical foothold would have been far more difficult had these critics been lone voices. Instead, they were able to reinforce their position through the backing of the larger academic field in two related ways. The first was through sourcing key theorists from different disciplines who were all working along similar lines, such as Barthes and Derrida in literary studies, Foucault in sociology and Lacan in psychoanalysis. Such similar theoretical sources made crossover between disciplines possible since the ideas of these figures were considered authoritative across a range of subjects. Second, those links could be strengthened through references to contemporary research conducted in other disciplines, particularly literary studies where writers like Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson were often invoked. Although one may not consider them card-carrying poststructuralists, their consistent references to poststructural theory signalled their solidarity with the larger poststructural project that was ascendant within the humanities, adding greater theoretical weight to their own art historical readings.<sup>20</sup>

The other aspect of their academic affiliations that advantaged academic leftist critics was academia, particularly the humanities, as a source for liberal, left or radical discourses. Not all of these institutions or their staff were leftist, of course, nor had universities historically been anything but bastions of privilege. However, universities became involved in the production of such discourses increasingly after WWII as leftist activists increasingly took up academic positions, especially after such institutions became sites for civil unrest over the war with Vietnam. Indeed, as activists found themselves increasingly marginalized in politics, academia became a safe-haven and network. (Karger and Stoesz 1993:217) Again, as a group of critics claiming to purvey a radical art historical framework, academic leftist critics in fact gained support from the humanities *as a site* for radical academic agendas. As we will see, this last point was particularly crucial in solidifying the position advanced by the academic leftist critics to position themselves as radical and downtown artists as reactionary.

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<sup>19</sup> Others that were implicitly included were Barthes, Derrida, Gramsci, Lyotard and Baudrillard. She also names Marx as one of these theorists, patently a historically inaccurate characterisation of his work.

<sup>20</sup> Although Eagleton conducted a critique of poststructuralism, some of its concepts still informed his Marxist perspective. Eagleton (1983:134,150) divides poststructuralism into what he endorses (albeit with qualifications) as “point[ing] in a more positive direction” - Foucault, Derrida and Kristeva - from what he calls “a hedonist withdrawal from history, a cult of ambiguity or irresponsible anarchism.” Likewise, Jameson critiques the relativistic excesses of poststructuralism in the desire to maintain central Marxist fundamentals, namely long term economic structures. However, he also enmeshes his Marxism with poststructuralist ideas such as difference, the discursive determinations of truth, and even argues that any form of agency should be understood within a Lacanian framework that focuses upon subject positioning. (1991:408)



Certainly, this combination of structural and cultural elements – institutional placement, pedagogic access to artists and art production, relationship with museums, support of a broader poststructural movement within the humanities and academia as a site for radical political agendas – provided an extensive set of avenues through which this particular group of leftist critics may have successfully advanced their cause. However, those avenues could not promote their interests in themselves without the coordinated activities of corporate agency. With other groups of academics maintaining different agendas but similarly positioned, academic leftist critics had to *use* the institutional means available to them, namely conferences and publications as well as their positions as educators in art history. Their institutional positioning, then, *enabled* them to assert their art historical vision as the dominant one.

Academic leftist critics recognised this need when the editors of *October* (1981:123) wrote: “It will not do, however, to flail about defensively...” as had, it should be noted, the traditionalists. Instead, they worked tactically to simultaneously reinforce the group’s critical agenda, promote favoured artists, and dominate over other art historical interpretations put forward during a period that seemed to be critical chaos. As mentioned previously, they began by initiating numerous, highly visible, coordinated activities such as symposia and published collections that advanced group aims. The *Discussions in Contemporary Art* series is one such example. Each volume acted to reinforce the common objectives and common enemies of the contributors in the introduction, and the series as a whole was given institutional credibility by the series editor, Hal Foster, who was in a position to use his personal connections with both the publisher of Bay Press, Thatcher Bailey, and the executive director of DIA, Charlie Wright.<sup>21</sup>

In so doing, the critics reinforced their own interests by shoring up support. The review of the *October* project by Margaret Iverson, in which she uncompromisingly praises their critical viewpoints, theoretical references, and aims, reflected such solidarity. As Cash (1994:35) explained about the criticism of Lucy Lippard, “[t]he paradox of activist art and criticism is that the message usually only reaches an audience who already has an opinion on the issue, and frequently the same opinion.” Whilst this may have acted as a hindrance for critics attempting to engage in the social arena, its immediate effects were as a reinforcing agent within the academic leftist critics’ own community.

Another aspect to the advancement of their agenda was the direct engagement with artists whose political projects they endorsed. Carrier (1989:37) brought to light the relationship between their critical frameworks and their subjects when he noted that “[d]espite these critics’ attempts to challenge the dominant ideologies of the eighties, the tangible result of their rhetoric is to promote the art they discuss.” At a symposium held in 1983 entitled “The Political Content of Art”, panellist Craig Owens directly praised fellow panellist, Jenny Holzer’s strategic agenda whilst explicitly entwining such endorsement with his own “Gramscian” critical perspective. (Stark 1984:80) Importantly, this commitment was not simply in the form of exhibition or critical endorsement but the incorporation of the theoretical views and writings of these artists into their



own publications. *Discussions on Contemporary Culture No. 1* (Foster 1987), for instance, includes Barbara Kruger, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and Trihn Minh-Ha, whilst *October* published numerous articles by Minimal and Conceptual artists. In these ways, academic leftists positioned themselves as a force *within* the world of contemporary art.

The impact of such endorsement on artists themselves attested to the very real influence these critics held. Sherrie Levine, for example, was initially endorsed wholeheartedly for her work. However, the artist revealed her sense that academic interpretations were smothering her work, and she reacted accordingly. Not only did she make the decision to move to a commercial gallery but she remarked, "I'm not making art to make a point or to illustrate a theory." (Siegel 1988:249)<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Sandler (1996:390) has noted that her move to Mary Boone in 1989 led to the abandonment of support previously offered by many of her academic devotees. Indeed, the association of academia and contemporary art was crucial for artistic success. Artist Alan Moore (2002) has suggested that the lack of an academic background has ultimately compromised his career, particularly when compared with others in his downtown peer group.

[T]here really are very few opportunities in art film and video and they're locked up by the people who have MFAs... You do not get a job in teaching, which is the main way to support yourself – in fact, you often don't even get shows unless you have these institutional credentials. That's the network of associations that I didn't have and it became increasingly a liability. I knew for sure when people who were part of my group wouldn't hire me to teach. That was like, whoops, wrong turn.

Walter Robinson (Siegel 1988:179) further cements the relationship between artistic success and these particular academics. "We did tend to ignore barriers of class and race that elite art world types like Owens helped to maintain. As it turned out, the real money was in marketing emblems of upscale, academic philosophies imported from Europe."

But one element proved to be vital for the academic leftist critics' ability to shore up support and leave those least favoured artists and critics behind. Given the context of the rising right-wing political tide, the capacity of these critics to claim that their agenda was the only radical one *in a sea of conservatism* gave them an edge in making themselves heard. This claim was made explicit, particularly with reference to the other three groups of critics discussed, and was done so by casting themselves in the role of 'good' radicals whereas all others were cast as 'bad' conservatives, neo-conservatives or Reaganites.<sup>23</sup> The title of Iverson's review (1983) serves as the clearest example, where the title of "Avant-Guardian Angels" is reverently bestowed upon *October* (1981:122), whilst the editors of *October* refer to a wide collection of journals, critics, artists and institutions pejoratively as "an anachronistic, self-perpetuating hegemony."

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<sup>21</sup> For a detailed explication of the connections between Foster, Bailey and Wright, see Mudede (2002).

<sup>22</sup> Sandler (1996:545-547) noted a similar feeling amongst other artists, namely Sarah Charlesworth and Louise Lawler.



Despite claiming to have successfully purged the moralism of the humanist position out of their frameworks and maintaining an “extreme denial of the relevancy of ethics in art-making,” (Bosworth 1991:454) these claims cannot be understood as anything but ethically and morally motivated. One need only survey the various philosophical debates on aesthetics and morals (Carroll 2000; Kieran 2001; Mullin 2002) to see that the trend of academic leftist critics to pinpoint a work’s political motivations falls into the long tradition of ethical criticism. Carroll (2000:350) has pointed out that “[d]espite the effective moratorium on ethical criticism in philosophical theories of art, the ethical evaluation of art flourished in the critical estate. Indeed, with regard to topics like racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on, it may even be the case that today that the ethical discussion of art is the dominant approach on offer by most humanistic critics, both academics and literati alike.”

Ultimately this morally inflected post-structural framework was used as an outright measure of assessment in judging both works and other critical positions. *October*’s claim to “ignore foolishness, confident in the conviction it would go away” (1981:4) holds little significance unless understood as a moral judgement on the activities of the art world, particularly that of other critics. This point is particularly salient when contextualising the publication of Deutsche and Ryan’s critique of the East Village in the pages of *October*. Although their article stands out as significantly different in style and methodology (they provide a straightforward sociological critique rather than the usual poststructural interpretive approaches), they shared the same ethical judgement of downtown artists by the *October* editorial board, as morally bankrupt capitalists. Indeed, their opinion was advanced so forcefully, that they were ultimately included in the *October*’s first 10-year celebratory anthology despite the differences in interpretive approach.

The position of academic leftist critics within the more liberal environment of contemporary art was precisely what made their use of the pejorative labels of ‘conservative’ and ‘Reaganite’ so powerful. The term itself would hardly have concerned someone like Hilton Kramer who, despite professing to be apolitical in his vision of art, clearly signalled his conservative allegiance when backing Reagan’s appointee, Frank Hodsoll, declaring his patriotism, and condemning the liberal/leftist agenda of the NEA as the “enemy within.” But the moral implication of the term ‘Reaganite’ carried appreciably negative weight for any academic or artist who considered him or herself to be progressive in any way. This was particularly so for artist critics who felt themselves to be challenging the same conservative institutions albeit in different ways. (McCormick 1999:159)

Artists and critics attempted to pursue their own agenda in direct opposition to that of the academic critiques. However, their characterisation as ‘conservative’ affected their long-term reception amongst the key producers of art history. By casting the downtown scene in this light, their work and their activity became almost untouchable, since any academic not wishing to be

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<sup>23</sup> Pearlman made this same point but with reference to this their categorisation of artists as either ‘good’ or bad’. (1998:147)



perceived as reactionary either had to reiterate the same leftist criticisms (Bolton 1993) or else retrace the divisions outlined by the academic leftists (Bowler and McBurney). This was reinforced by the disparagement of artist critics for their wholehearted endorsement of the scene, making any enthusiasm seem suspect. Furthermore, the strength and visibility of the academic leftist agenda through its sheer volume and reinforcement within the humanities, demanded engagement with it, lest one was to be left in the academic wilderness.

These claims may seem strong, but one only need turn to criticisms of similar poststructural enterprises in other fields to illustrate the vehemence with which adherents cast moral judgement on their opponents using the concepts of radical versus conservative. Raymond Tallis (1995), professor of Geriatric Medicine, took up the challenge of linguistics, writing a thorough and lucid theoretical critique of semiotics in *Not Saussure*. Despite the fact that those in the field of linguistics have long abandoned Saussure's theories, Tallis remarked upon the degree to which moral judgement was cast upon his personal character by those in literary studies for writing such a book, by issuing a warning to anyone wishing to undertake a critique of poststructural theory. "[Y]our views will be 'placed' or dismissed and you may even be abused...." Indeed, he cited an example in which his book is dismissed as "scouse common sense" and another in which he is accused of "xenophobic Protestantism". (xi,xv) What motivated such criticisms is the belief that poststructuralism is *both* politically radical and ethically virtuous whilst its' critique (especially from someone in a scientific discipline) must be inherently reactionary and amoral. Challenging such views, then, whilst still endeavouring to maintain an ethical perspective has been a daunting path for any academic not wishing to be labelled as a morally and politically reactionary.

As a result, the academic leftists under consideration here have maintained long-term control of the historical, theoretical and moral terms by which downtown artists are understood. Writers such as Foster and Owens became academic stars in their own right, hosting symposiums, touring as guest lecturers, publishing articles and editing anthologies. They had at their disposal the institutional framework and the academic authority to disseminate their version of downtown art, particularly through such prestigious journals as *Art in America* and *October*. It was the institutional roles of these writers within the traditional and powerful academic structures that facilitated the establishment of their voices as authoritative on art of the period. As Pearlman (1998:212-213) has highlighted, it is not the writings of scene enthusiasts like Carlo McCormack or Nicolas Moufarrege, or scene participants like Steven Hager or Alan Moore that appear on our reading lists. Instead, texts like *The Anti-aesthetic* or *Art After Modernism* by Foster, Owens and the *October* writers are commonly found even on the most introductory syllabus for contemporary art. Moreover, their positions on art history have been reproduced through other academic writings. As suggested above, one must make one's art historical analysis relevant to academic debate in order to be included in it. With the dominance of these academic leftists within discussions on 'postmodern' art, addressing their work is mandatory and unavoidable.



However, the continuous reiteration of this particular project was neither necessary nor determined given the contingent relationship of their framework to the avenues of transmission. Indeed, had they been unable to co-ordinate their work and enact their corporate agency, we might all be reading a completely different set of critical literature. Furthermore, terms of reference pertaining to the downtown scene are beginning to change. For one thing, several of the artist critics are still committed to shaping the retrospective understanding of their scene. The *Artforum* special issue in 1999 included the writings of Carlo McCormick, Ann Magnuson and Glenn O'Brien, all of whom geared their articles toward presenting their own (positive) interpretation of the downtown scene. Several artist critics have also recently produced a book with different critical perspectives on the work of Kenny Scharf (Blinderman et. al. 1998), and Group Material member Julie Ault (2003) has compiled a collection of essays examining alternative practices in New York's downtown scene including some of those of the period under consideration. Several former participants, including Alan Moore and Paul Tschinkel, are actively using contemporary technology to distribute their video and television works, just as they had over 20 years ago.

A new generation of academics have also taken an interest in re-examining the downtown scene with fresh perspectives. Pearlman (1998), Little (2001) and Kirwin (1999) have all produced PhD work examining different aspects of the period with renewed enthusiasm. Importantly, the latter two academics have developed sophisticated historical accounts of the scene's group activity rather than retracing the same intellectually exhausted, evaluative project. These works, and others to come, will hopefully provide fresh perspectives on what has, until now, been a neglected area of contemporary art history.



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